"A GREAT STAINED ALTARSTONE": THE ENVIRONMENTAL CURSE AND ECOLOGICAL VIOLENCE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BORDER FICTION

A Thesis
by
KARLE STINEHOUR

Submitted to the Graduate School
at Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

May 2019
Department of English

“A GREAT STAINED ALTARSTONE”: THE ENVIRONMENTAL CURSE AND ECOLOGICAL VIOLENCE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY’S BORDER FICTION

A Thesis
by
KARLE STINEHOUR
May 2019

APPROVED BY:

Zackary Vernon, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

Chris Meade, Ph.D.
Member, Thesis Committee

Kristina Groover, Ph.D.
Member, Thesis Committee

Tammy Wahpeconiah, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Department of English

Mike McKenzie, Ph.D.
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

Abstract

"A GREAT STAINED ALTARSTONE": THE ENVIRONMENTAL CURSE AND ECOLOGICAL VIOLENCE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BORDER FICTION

Karle Stinehour
B.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Zackary Vernon, Ph.D.

This thesis examines the violence in Cormac McCarthy's border fiction in environmental terms. Primarily, it looks to *Blood Meridian* (1985) and the Border Trilogy—which consists of the novels *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—to explore the concomitances and tensions between history, cultural myth, and environmental violence. I triangulate pertinent historical, settler colonial, and ecocritical theories to navigate the ways in which McCarthy frames the violence in his western novels as a curse incurred by human tendencies to separate nature and culture into two distinct categories. *Blood Meridian* lays the foundation for the concept of the environmental curse through the terminology *terra damnata*, literally "damned earth." Because of continuous human abuse via the implementation of artificial borders and the human desire to dominate nature, humanity now lives under a probationary curse. Particular human cultures exist in epistemic opposition to the nature. There is a rupture between nature and culture that creates a distance between humans and the world they inhabit. My

analysis of the Border Trilogy traces out the implications of this curse, this nature/culture binary, in more recent history, which includes industrialization and increased enforcement of borders in the United States Southwest. Finally, this thesis concludes by travelling eastward. McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road* (2006), depicts the world as desolate and burnt in its entirety. The violence that is inaugurated earlier in McCarthy's oeuvre culminates in the utter and complete destruction of the world in *The Road.* This final novel serves as an ethical imperative to remember the human history of violence, witness the cataclysm awaiting the world if it continues on its current trajectory of anthropocentric abuse, and take action in our current moment before it is too late.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my thesis director Dr. Zackary Vernon for his guidance, feedback, and insight throughout the thesis process. I would not have been able to successfully complete this thesis were it not for Dr. Vernon's continuous support and encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr. Kristina Groover and Dr. Chris Meade for their work as the two other members of my thesis committee. Their feedback pointed me towards resources that greatly strengthened my thesis. Additionally, the members of my cohort have been gracious enough to listen to me when I need to work through an idea. Finally, I would like to thank my wife Natalie for her unending patience, support, and encouragement.

Dedication

For Natalie.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Readers of Cormac McCarthy's fiction often characterize his works by their unflinching, sweeping descriptions of scenes of violence. Thematically, violence seems to be almost an obsession of McCarthy's; whether it is natural violence or violence caused by human hands, it is ubiquitous in his oeuvre. In particular, his novels set along the United States-Mexico Border, specifically *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, feature some of the most intense and grotesque acts of murder, brutality, and destruction. That spatial element, the border, unlocks some of the mystery surrounding this violence that can seem gratuitous, even valorized, at times. In fact, the texts do not celebrate the widespread gore and bloodshed littering the border space, but they depict the complex interweaving of a history of settler colonialism, notions of place, and environmental abuses that contribute to the manifestation of the horrors that McCarthy depicts. McCarthy instead interrogates the forces, both metaphysical and institutional, that inevitably lead to the scenes of terror that he so aptly paints. In that regard, I look to the border space and its attendant history to illuminate the ways in which McCarthy's western fiction configures nature, culture, and broader themes of violence.

Set historically in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, *Blood Meridian* (1985) explores most overtly the sociohistorical consequences of violence in the border space, and, as such, it serves as the primary text of my analysis. From the outset, McCarthy entangles the violence enacted in the novel with history. Describing the kid—the character to whom many scholars attribute the title "hero," though I have some reservations with that nomenclature—he writes, "He watches, pale and unwashed. He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the

child the father of the man" (3). Accordingly, the novel attributes the kid's violence both to history and to the lands in which he travels: "His origins are become as remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (5). In just the first few pages, the text invites us to contemplate how violence is born. History and mythology form the violence that inheres in the kid from birth, though there always remains an air of mystery around the exact condition of the kid's moral standing. Clearly, though the novel remains indeterminate when it comes to giving actual answers, McCarthy figures violence in a manner in which we must approach its origins with history, culture, and nature in mind. Those categories are inseparable, which is why *Blood Meridian* stands as the touchstone, the text that forms the foundation of my thesis.

Roughly a century after the events of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy renders the US-Mexico border in its post-WWII, post-nuclear context in the Border Trilogy, which includes *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). These novels portray a rapidly modernizing space in which the primordial and mythic violence of *Blood Meridian* transforms into apocalyptic visions of futurity, a representation of the old history of the American southwest coming to its more contemporary conclusions. Some of the earliest formations of American westward expansion, historiographic records transformed into cultural myth, lead to a current-day manifestation of those same imperial practices. By the end of the Border Trilogy, we even witness images of the future, barren hellscapes where culture and environment deteriorate rapidly. For that reason, a brief overview of the texts is necessary before I explain their significance in my research design.

All the Pretty Horses follows John Grady Cole, an adolescent boy who leaves his home on a ranch in Texas and crosses the border into Mexico, where he hopes to leave behind the restraints of his paternal homeland to discover some fantastic unenculturated dreamscape free from the violence and restrictions of his own land. John Grady leaves home after a family funeral, mounts his horse, and rides "at the hour he'd always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past" (5). John Grady nostalgically imagines the border, but this is a false nostalgia, a fantasy disconnected from historical realities. In his ensuing journey to Mexico, John Grady's perceptions of the border space as an idyllic, pastoral paradise where the noble native warrior fought honorably is entirely deconstructed by the violence he witnesses. There is nothing nostalgic in the history of that contentious land, and John Grady's dreams are shattered by it. The personal myth he holds so dearly falls prey to the natural, institutional, and environmental violence of the border.

Next in the trilogy is *The Crossing*, which occurs roughly a decade before John Grady's story and tracks the life of Billy Parham, another adolescent boy living on a ranch in the Southwest. The novel's moment of crisis centers around Billy's capture of a she-wolf on his family's ranch. Instead of killing the wolf, however, he crosses the mountains on the border of the United States and Mexico, a wilderness in Billy's mind, to release the animal back into the wild. McCarthy describes the landscape, "The new country was rich and wild. You could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence" (3). The wildness of the land, and the wildness of the she-wolf, play a crucial role in my own analysis as I explore the ways in which Billy mythologizes the border space.

Finally, McCarthy brings John Grady Cole and Billy Parham together in *Cities of the Plain*, where the two characters are young men working as ranch hands in New Mexico. Set mostly in 1952, the novel serves as a capstone in the Border Trilogy's exploration of modern nostalgia associated with the border. John Grady's doomed love affair with a prostitute named Magdalena in Juarez ends in his death at the hands of the local pimp Eduardo who discovers John Grady's attempt to free Magdalena. Eduardo slits Magdalena's throat and later kills John Grady in a confrontation over Magdalena's murder, all of which Billy Parham witnesses. Thematically speaking, this novel emphatically critiques the US American cultural nostalgia associated with the Southwest, though it caps off a trilogy that often partakes in the same discourse that it attempts to subvert.

Overall, the Border Trilogy extends the pictures of violence indicative of a mythic, primordial past in *Blood Meridian* and composes accounts of its reach in our contemporary world. I include these novels in my thesis because they clearly interact with the dramatic historical rendering of *Blood Meridian*, and their environmental themes are strongly rooted in said history. Brought together, these four novels compound to form a comprehensive view of the ways in which culture, history, and the environment comprise the United States-Mexico border space.

In order to further elucidate the complexities of McCarthy's border spaces, I must first attend to the theoretical frameworks that inform my analysis. Primarily, I ground my work in three major bodies of theory. The first is a historical approach in which I look at the sociohistorical cultural mythologies regarding the frontier myth. My historical methodology is akin to that of Walter Benjamin in his work "On the Concept of History" (1940). Benjamin calls his methodology historical materialism, and that is the term I will use, as well. The next

theoretical model is Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory, an expansive concept contemplating the ways in which the history and politics of border spaces affect language, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and culture. For my final theoretical approach, I look to important texts in ecocritical and bioregional theory to help illuminate the ways in which nature and culture meet in McCarthy's fiction.

Frederick Jackson Turner's notorious frontier thesis, which he puts forward in *The Frontier in American History* (1920), is the first historical framing of the US American West that influences my reading of McCarty's western novels. Turner brings together cultural myth and history in a centripetal motion that is symptomatic of the US American colonial expansion westward. Problematically, Turner conceives of the West as an untouched virgin landscape that is in constant danger of recession because of US American expansion. Turner's claims that the West was a historically free land with no connections to human culture ignores the millennia of indigenous settlement in the vast region before Euro-American settlers ever occupied it. In that regard, the frontier thesis is one of the primary sources for the cultural frontier myth that falls under my critique of the historical treatment of US American imperialism, which mostly takes the form of settler colonialism in my analysis.

The history of settler colonialism is the same history lurking in the background of *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy. Namely, settler colonialism consists of the settlement and hegemonic expansion into contiguous regions, which is a distinct approach to imperial dominance from postcolonial historiography in that it examines domination in its nearness. The key features of settler colonialism are continental expansion and population replacement. The study of settler colonial history is important to my research design because

it is the history of the United States-Mexico Border, the conflicting and often confusing reality of the violent and arbitrary delineation of borders.

For the purposes of nuance, my historical approach to McCarthy's works does not fall under the category historicist, which is why I employ Benjamin's theoretical work "On the Concept of History" (1940). Regarding his methodology, Benjamin famously writes, "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (391). This is the manner in which I articulate the past. I do not aim to present the past as it actually was. I appropriate the images of the past that appear in McCarthy's fiction as they appear in our present moment of danger, in a cultural and political atmosphere that denies climate science and that downplays the violence and abuse that characterize US American history and our nation's adverse relationship to the natural world. By utilizing Benjamin's theory of historical materialism, I navigate the images of violence in McCarthy's fiction as memories and echoes of the United States' history that still resonate in our current historical moment.

Like Benjamin's essay, Anzaldúa's landmark work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) receives a great deal of attention in my analysis of McCarthy's border space because it interacts heavily with the violent realities of Euro-American expansion in the border region. To responsibly explore the historical and sociopolitical formations of the border requires an engagement with the dynamics of power and domination in that space, which is exactly what Anzaldúa does. Her powerful critique of Anglo exploitation informs and influences my own work. Though my own analysis is primarily ecological, I take into account sociohistorical expressions of US American imperial power that are similar to those that Anzaldúa puts under critical review.

Donna Haraway's work "Companion Species Manifesto" (2003) defines the concept of natureculture, which means that nature and culture do not mark two distinct categories. Instead, nature and culture are inseparable. It is also more appropriate to speak of naturecultures in the plural, since neither nature or culture are homogenous. To reduce the word to a singular natureculture erases the diversity of human communities and ignores the heterogeneity of nature, as well. Understanding McCarthy's works in terms of naturecultures expands how we can approach his fiction, because the ecological, social, and political violence that occurs in his novels often stem from human attempts to view nature and culture as separate and distinct.

Mostly, the scope of my work is ecocritical. I incorporate cultural myth, the history of settler colonialism, and Anzaldúa's border theory into a broader, more environmentally focused critique of the dichotomy between nature and culture. To challenge that arbitrary bifurcation, I look to bioregional theory, a subfield of the environmental humanities that considers the ways in which a specific region—that is, "place," to use bioregional terminology—shapes and is shaped by human culture. In this viewpoint, nature and culture are not distinct, abstract, or hierarchical categories, but are, instead, entwined, coexistent, and interdependent.

Regarding the major relevant scholarship, I divide it into three categories: the first I call the "constructions of nature" category, the second is "border function," and the third is bioregional and environmental criticism. Constructions of nature includes philosophical and theological explorations of the ways in which McCarthy renders nature, which usually divides into one camp that views McCarthy's world as formed by dark Romantic Idealism, a sort of gnostic world in which matter is inherently evil, and the other purely materialist view

in which matter simply is, and the world's violence has nothing to do with its malevolence. The border function category looks at the border not so much in its ecological or environmental functions, but in its implications for sociopolitical power, dynamics of race, and cultural myth. The selected ecocritical and bioregional McCarthy criticism most often looks to the symbiotic relationship between nature culture in which the violence of human institutions reflects back upon nature and vice versa.

Overall, there is not so much of a gap in the scholarship—criticism on McCarthy is quite prolific—as there is a critical nearsightedness. Though I would not quite denominate the scholarly priorities as myopic, I do say that there is a tendency to be too narrowly focused. For example, in the Gnosticism-materialism debate, either *Blood Meridian* espouses a gnostic construction of the universe, or it is purely material. In other debates, the border either represents ethnic encounter, or it signifies geopolitical tension. Holistic approaches are rare. My own critical intervention is primarily ecological, which is to say, it accounts for context and place. In other words, it recognizes the affordances and power of bioregional theory, a field of study that does not separate reason and nature, culture and land, but instead emphasizes the interrelatedness and inherent materiality of all of those abstractly defined categories. I assert that such a critical framework elucidates the violence of the border space in McCarthy's West and gestures toward new ways of thinking about region-specific naturecultures. Rather, new methods of reading that explore naturecultures as they pertain to individual regions, like the US American Southwest in the case of my own research, prove especially useful for exploring McCarthy's novels.

Regarding the chapter layout of my thesis, I have divided it into this introductory chapter, a literature review, two body chapters, and a coda. I devote the entirety of the first

body chapter, titled "The Implement and the Suzerain: *Blood Meridian* and Ecological Domination," to a singular text. The second body chapter, titled "The Tale and the Witness: Knowing the World in the Border Trilogy," examines *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain* as texts that should be read together to fully understand the resonances of the history described in *Blood Meridian*. I conclude the thesis with a coda, titled "The World in Its Burning," in which I analyze the catastrophe toward which the world is heading, the eschaton, the unveiling, the effect of the human abuse of power on the world. The literature review resembles what I have already outlined in this introduction but with more detail and greater consideration of the major trends in the various bodies of scholarship. The rest of the chapters deserve more explicit and thorough explanation.

Blood Meridian has proven to be an expansive text, massive in its implications, which is why I have chosen to give it its own chapter. More specifically, I divide this chapter into three sections: one that arrests the images of violence echoing from the aftermath of the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, another that places the actions of the Glanton Gang in relation to the southwestern landscape, and a final section, which, inevitably, investigates the environmental implications of Judge Holden as a character. The purpose of this chapter is to lay the sociohistorical groundwork for the more contemporary reverberations of history in a more contemporary age.

The section that traces themes of military and political violence in *Blood Meridian* mostly emphasizes the kid's brief stint with the United States Army and skirmishes with indigenous peoples along the border after the Mexican-American War. In this section of the novel, the kid happens upon a regiment of the United States Army and joins them. More than any other passage in the novel, this one symptomatizes Turner's frontier thesis. Captain

White, who enlists the kid, sermonizes, “There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there’s no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That’s right. Others come in and govern for them” (36). Captain White’s rationalization of American intervention in Mexico eerily reminds us of what settler colonialist practices can look like: the false justification of military violence.

The next section of this chapter will foreground the Glanton Gang and their horrific actions in relation to the landscape. In particular, the episode where Tobin describes how the judge creates makeshift gunpowder to defeat a hostile army of an indigenous border tribe stands out as a particularly disgusting infringement of colonial power. Tobin recounts how the judge commands the gang to urinate into a mixture of natural elements to create gunpowder. This grotesque scene that Tobin describes exemplifies how colonial intervention often denigrates and befouls the natural world. Clearly, the Glanton Gang’s abuse of the earth raises questions over how exactly nature and culture are interrelated.

The final section of the *Blood Meridian* chapter investigates Judge Holden, who has drawn much attention from the major scholarship. I devote an entire section of the thesis to him because he seems to symbolize some of the most terrifying aspects of US American imperial expansion. Declaring his reasons for documenting every new piece of knowledge in his journal, the judge hauntingly declares, “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my permission” (207). Later in the same conversation, he states, “Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (207). The judge’s goal is to extend his power over the entire earth, bending all naturecultures to his will

and enacting dominance over all life. In that sense, he exposes the ugly truth about US American westward expansion. Its purpose, like Captain White's, is to govern in places where there are governments established already, governments that must fall subject to colonial suzerainty. Overall, this chapter culminates with a discussion on Judge Holden because he almost monolithically signifies the violence of settler colonialism.

Chapter 2 encompasses the entire Border Trilogy, which I then break up into three sections, one for each volume in the series. However, each section emphasizes the interrelatedness of the three novels. The rationale for this decision is largely the same as McCarthy's reason for calling it a trilogy: the stories of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are brought together and entangled in the trilogy's final installment, *Cities of the Plain*. Because of that third novel, the series is too tied-together thematically to break that section of the thesis up into three entirely distinct parts.

The first section of Chapter 2 largely sets out to subvert John Grady's misplaced ecological and cultural nostalgia in *All the Pretty Horses*. When he departs from his childhood home, John Grady imagines the borderlands "where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited" (5). Essentially, he daydreams about an unenculturated mythological past that never existed in which the indigenous peoples roamed freely about the land with no governmental or sociopolitical worries. By unenculturated, I mean that this myth of the noble savage depicts Native Americans and indigenous people as lacking culture, which therefore positions them in closer relation to nature as a category separate from culture. Like the novel itself, I aim to problematize John Grady's nostalgia via the harsh realities of state-enacted violence in such a contentious bioregion. It is in this section that I enter into the heaviest

dialogue with Anzaldúa because she also challenges such false nostalgia concerning the border space.

In the second section of this chapter, the one dealing with *The Crossing*, I read Billy Parham's trek into the mountains on the United States-Mexico border with the she-wolf as a wilderness narrative. However, the text does not allow the same sort of nostalgia for a mythic ecological past as it does for John Grady. McCarthy writes concerning Billy's journey through the mountains, "Doomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then and the now" (129). Billy will not find what he is looking for because he has created a nature/culture binary in his mind. He will not find land free from enculturation, just as he will not find culture that is not bound by the material, natural world. Through Billy's wilderness narrative, McCarthy subverts the binarization of nature and culture.

Finally, I argue that ecological readings of McCarthy's western fiction should be conducted in light of natureculture and bioregional theory. I will center the entirety of this section on a dream that a stranger narrates to the now aged and homeless Billy about a sacrificial altar high in the mountains of his dreamscape in *Cities of the Plain*. The stranger tells Billy about his dream, "And then his [the dream traveler's] eyes fell upon this bloodstained altarstone which the weathers of the sierra and the sierra's storms had these millennia been impotent to cleanse" (270). I contend that this altarstone upon which men have been sacrificed since primordial ages past represents the false covenant humanity has made. This human sacrifice epistemologically profanes the unified bond between nature and culture, and it divides, splits natureculture into two distinct, abstract categories. There is a blasphemous blood pact between humans and violence that even the harshest storms cannot wash away. This altarstone is the site of the curse incurred upon the land by human refusal to

recognizes nature and culture as inseparable. Out of all of the sections of my thesis, this one has the least interaction with outside scholarship mostly because it has attracted much less attention than the other works I analyze, which is a minor scholarly exigence that I recognize.

Before I move on to the coda, I include one last section in the *Cities of the Plain* chapter in which I tie together the running themes of all four novels that I focus on in my thesis. The concept of the altarstone provides the common link between McCarthy's works, and it serves as the central concept in my analysis. Notably, the quote from which I derive the title of my thesis comes from *Blood Meridian*, to which Billy's dream clearly signals. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy describes the border as "the world beyond where all the land lay under darkness and all a great stained altarstone" (108). The lifeblood of humanity runs through and in the land. This spilt blood constitutes a violent profaning of the world. Evidently, McCarthy inseparably connects human life and the environment. In that regard, the blood pact—for that is what is occurring on the altarstone—between human artifice and the material world connotes natureculture, rather than a destructive separation of nature and culture, an amputation. As the natureculture in question refers to the US-Mexico border, regionalism also clearly plays a role in the literary configuration of the altarstone, an image that represents the connection between humans and the land and that runs throughout McCarthy's western fiction.

The last chapter of the thesis is a coda in which I point to new directions in McCarthy scholarship and briefly direct attention to McCarthy's most recent novel *The Road* (2006) as a logical next step for exploring ecological configurations of the border in that the novel portrays a world in which artificial and unnatural borders fall under the judgment of fire. However, I will not spend as much time with *The Road* as I will with *Blood Meridian* and the

Border Trilogy because it serves more as a signpost, a text guiding us to new opportunities in the field, whereas the other novels are the main subject of my analysis. Regarding scholarship, for a significant body of major scholarly works in the field, the stakes of their criticism are grounded in determining the metaphysical implications of McCarthy's borderlands, which are not limited to the West. I gesture to natureculture and bioregionalism to conclude that place, context, and land play a much larger role in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy than much of the field is willing to recognize. Looking forward, this thesis should offer new ways of reading McCarthy ecologically and outside of the bounds of typical conventions. Methodologically speaking, I offer a fresh mode of research that builds upon past scholarship and expands upon it to include bioregional natureculture in our approach to McCarthy's western novels.

Literature Review

Ecocriticism abounds in McCarthy scholarship, and, even if the scholarly works are not expressly ecocritical, they still raise questions concerning nature, culture, materiality, and history that all prove pertinent to the overall dialogue. Moreover, a new trend in criticism that specifically examines borders spaces as ecological spaces is emerging and illuminating even further an already rich body of scholarship. Though the border is a concept present in most of McCarthy's works, the scope of my research lies in his western novels, primarily *Blood* Meridian and the Border Trilogy, though *The Road* does factor into the conclusion. In particular, my research design incorporates history, Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory, Donna Haraway's concept of natureculture, and bioregional theory to explore the ecological dynamics of the United States-Mexico border.

The history of Euro-American settlement in the US American West brings clarity to the violent conflict, contention, and confusion that is ubiquitous in McCarthy's border space. The Mexican-American War, the historical context of *Blood Meridian*, accounts for the literal expansion of American territory. In turn, the novels of the Border Trilogy navigate a history of US American imperialism that takes its form in capitalist industrialism, oil interests, and the increasing demarcation of borders during the mid-Twentieth Century. Though these historical moments contain differing sociopolitical contexts, they both contain traces of a key cultural myth: the myth of the frontier.

Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis accurately characterizes the frontier myth in that it clearly marks the US American West as a formerly mythic wilderness in the US American cultural imaginary. In *The Frontier in American History* (1921), Turner famously writes, "The existence of a free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American

settlement westward, explain American development" (1). In my thesis, I problematize that understanding of US American history, because it ignores the history of violence, genocide, and displacement of entire people groups on the so called "frontier" that McCarthy vividly depicts in *Blood Meridian* and grapples with in the Border Trilogy. Throughout my project, I refer to Turner's construction of American history as the frontier myth.

As a counterpoint to the frontier myth, I look to the history of settler colonialism to explore the ways in which McCarthy's fiction interacts with US American western expansion. Providing a strong working definition of settler colonialism, Lorenzo Veracini informs us that "The study of settler colonialism is necessarily premised on the realisation that colonialism does not always arrive on boats and that settlers typically act on their own behalf, not as agents of distant metropoles" (2). Veracini operates under the assumption that colonialism does not always have to abide by the "blue water" definition, meaning colonialism occurs in singular continents, even singular regions. In that regard, colonialism does not require an ocean of distance between the colonizer and the colonized, as evidenced by American expansion westward. In the displacement, genocide, and political oppression of the indigenous American population, the United States government resorted to settler colonialism as its primary mode of domination.

Walter Benjamin's influential essay "On the Concept of History" (1940) influences my understanding of history in McCarthy's works of border fiction in that my approach cannot strictly be described as historicist. My goal, as Benjamin puts it, is "to hold fast the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger" (391). It is not to depict the past in its actuality. Rather, McCarthy's border fiction provides a prime opportunity to see the resonances of the historical referents in works like

Blood Meridian and the Border Trilogy in our current moment of danger, a time in which ecological disaster constantly threatens our world.

As one of the major theoretical frameworks for my thesis, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), greatly informs the way I look at the border space and challenges Turner's frontier thesis, though indirectly. In the "Preface to the First Edition" of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa writes, "In fact the borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch" (19). Though Anzaldúa largely focuses on issues of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, her historical method of examining borderlands holds major implications for settler colonial studies, the frontier myth, and major environmental theories. I can make the claim that Anzaldúa's border theory bears weight in an ecological discussion because of the inherently interdisciplinary nature of ecocritical studies. Race, gender, and culture all play into my overall thesis and can be considered ecological issues as the other theoretical texts I utilize show.

Surprisingly, Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory receives no attention in the criticism of McCarthy's western works, let alone the ecological criticism surrounding them. Understandably, the connection between Anzaldúa and McCarthy is not immediately obvious, and, if not made carefully, could be in danger of tokenizing a woman and scholar of color in an academic debate about an Anglo male author. However, by drawing links to the sociohistorical context of hegemony, oppression, and violence in the border space in which both Anzaldúa and McCarthy situate their works, I contend that there is a productive comparison between the two which the major scholarship supports.

Donna Haraway's "Companion Species Manifesto" (2003), though not an expressly ecocritical text, is important in my research design because it bridges the gap between more historical and sociocultural theories and more explicitly environmental texts. I have chosen this work as a major source of theoretical influence because it is where Haraway most clearly defines natureculture, a foundational concept in my thesis. She writes, "conceiving 'nature' and 'culture' as either polar opposites or universal categories is foolish" (100). Haraway establishes natureculture as a category in which the interrelatedness of the natural world and human cultural constructions is emphasized. Neither descriptor, nature or culture, is free from the entanglement of the other. This concept strongly powers my reading of McCarthy.

Likewise, one of Haraway's other works, "The Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), grapples with another central concept pertaining to nature and culture, which is how the human understanding of the world transforms in an increasingly industrialized, globalized, and technocratic age. As it pertains to McCarthy's works, the concept of the Cyborg draws a connection between cultural mythology and technology. Haraway writes, "Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other" (33), meaning that cultural myths and technology have a reflexive relationship in which technological tools establish meaning in cultural contexts. Likewise, myths bring technology into being. In ecological terms, the mutuality of myth and tool is an extension of natureculture in the age of capitalist industrialism and technological reproduction, or, rather, the historical backdrop of the Border Trilogy.

Finally, bioregional theory offers expressly ecological ways of reading McCarthy and ties together all of the previous theoretical threads. David Barnhill expands a more traditional conception of bioregional criticism—which consists of the physical, mental, and spiritual relationship of culture to nature—to say that "the bioregional habitat we identify with, then,

involves not merely physical space, but also social structures, economic systems, and political power" (213). Bioregional theory takes into account natureculture, the sociohistorical theory outlined by Veracini, and Anzaldúa's border theory when we take a glimpse at McCarthy's West. In that regard, all of the previous theoretical groundwork up to this point leads to bioregionalism, which will form the backbone of my thesis.

Moving forward, I have grouped the major McCarthy scholarship that will factor into my thesis into three major categories: criticism of McCarthy's constructions of nature, criticism of border functions, and bioregional criticism. These categories are not always completely separate from each other, and there is often some overlap between them. However, for the purposes of organization, I have divided them up as such, mostly because each of these bodies of scholarship has different goals and purposes that are distinct from the others.

History, mythology, natureculture, and bioregionalism make up the bodies of theory that inform my analysis. Now, I will move on to discuss the major trends in McCarthy scholarship that are also contextualized by the same theories. To accomplish that, I must first begin with the debate started by Leo Daugherty and Steven Shaviro. The works of each of these scholars, published in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1999), are in direct dialogue with each other, and, consequently, they sparked a debate that is still ongoing, which is the debate over whether or not McCarthy's construction of the natural world embraces Platonic dualism or philosophical materialism.

Daugherty's essay "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy" popularizes the idea that McCarthy figures material nature as evil, thus explaining the horrific violence that seems to embody the novel. Furthermore, Daugherty's claim that Judge

Holden is a gnostic archon—the demonic ruler of matter in gnostic thought—holds significant weight in the subsequent scholarship. The Judge 's primary "archonic element is of course *judgment*" (Daugherty 163). His criterion of judgment, of course, rests solely on whether or not something abides within his will. If it does not, he promptly brings his judgment down in a manner typical of the archon: through brutal material violence.

If Daugherty promotes one end of the spectrum, Shaviro espouses the dialectic antithesis in his essay "'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*." Rather radically, he argues, "There is no reserve of potentiality in *Blood Meridian*; everything is cruelly, splendidly actual. There is no transcendence, and no possibility of standing out from Being" (152). Shaviro adopts a purely materialist hermeneutic for interpreting *Blood Meridian* and argues for a more material reading of the text; nothing in the novel occurs separately from the material world.

The Daugherty-Shaviro debate emblematizes criticism on *Blood Meridian*, and the argument is still as contentious as ever. Steven Frye enters the discussion by noting the incomprehensibility of Judge Holden's role in the novel. At one point, Frye claims that the judge "espouses a brutish philosophy that McCarthy presents as the ethical outcome of a rigid philosophical materialism" (69). Elsewhere in the same chapter, he writes, "His [the judge's] indomitability suggests that he represents, connotes, even manifests a mysterious force beyond the physical world, a force that works as the primary energy that drives the engine of material nature" (78). Contradictorily so, the judge is both an ethical materialist and gnostic archon. He, to many scholars, confounds reasonable interpretation.

Also of note in the constructions of nature category, Julius Greve, Georg Guillemin, and Diane Luce all look to nature as a pastoral symbol of the romantic ideal. Greve

investigates McCarthy's configuration of nature through the philosophy of Lorenz Oken, a Nineteenth-Century German romantic philosopher. Looking particularly to McCarthy's use of the word "urstone," Greve argues that McCarthy's employment of this word points to Okenian questions of fate and agency as they relate to nature. Guillemin's monograph, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004) serves as one of the central works on nature in McCarthy scholarship. Guillemin, on the other hand, resists postmodern readings of *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy specifically. He claims that their romantic pastoralism pushes against postmodern readings and instead asks some of the same metaphysical, ontological, and epistemic questions as the US American romantics. Finally, Luce's critical work falls under the constructions of nature category. She argues that the world and narrative are indelibly intertwined in *The Crossing*. What these scholars all have in common is that they read nature as a romantic symbol, a signifier for spiritual realities beyond the materiality of the natural world. My own reading differs significantly from theirs because I foreground the material, sociohistorical, and cultural elements of McCarthy's western novels in order to craft an ecocritical reading of them. However, the scholarship of Greve, Guillemin and Luce still holds weight in my own work because it lays the foundation for the debate into which I am entering.

The second category of scholarship that I identify is what I have termed the border functions camp. The scholars within this body of research specifically attend to the spatial, geographical, ethnic, and sociopolitical elements of the border without necessarily devoting time to its expressly environmental implications. In that regard, this body of scholarship is important in understanding the border, but their priorities differ from mine when it comes to environmental readings of McCarthy's western novels.

Within this debate, John Blair, Jay Ellis, and Nicholas Monk put forth some of the most insightful criticism. Blair's primary consideration in his article is what role Mexico and border crossing plays for John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*. As John Grady crosses the border, Mexico shifts from the locus of the other to home for him, to a place of belonging in a violent, alienating world. Ellis situates his analysis of country in *Blood Meridian* in the historical context of three major events: Native American genocide on the US American frontier, the extermination of the buffalo, and the attempt to order a space, the US-Mexico border, into place, that is, transfiguring a "wild" environmental space into a place controlled by Anglo-American hegemony. Finally, Monk, though not in direct dialogue with Anzaldúa, interacts heavily with themes of the border space very similarly to the manner in which Anzaldúa approaches the border. Monk argues that the conflict in that space is largely due to geography, nationality, ethnicity, a physical border, and differing sociohistorical priorities. His analysis of *All the Pretty Horses* profoundly echoes Anzaldúa, and, for that reason, I include it in my research. All of these scholars have a common thread running throughout their work, and that is their attention to the border as a space of cultural contact, which often results in violent conflict.

Though the trend in the scholarship points to cultural contact, Blair perhaps gestures toward an older scholarly leaning regarding the border space in his work on *All the Pretty Horses*. He writes, "Mexico represents the alien-ness of the Other for McCarthy's young protagonist [John Grady], and his movement away from Texas and away from home is movement into the signature state of isolation in which virtually all of McCarthy's characters live" (301). In that regard, Blair reduces some of the complexities surrounding the border in which a transversal of that space is simply a journey into the other, an odyssey through the

unknown. While this approach is valuable in its own right, it does not focus enough on the materiality of the land, instead concentrating on the land's symbolic and aesthetic meaning.

Next, Monk, though not in any sort of specific dialogue with Blair, refutes Blair's notions of otherness on the border and includes ethnic encounter in his understanding of that same space. He writes, "to read the exchange" between Mexico and the United States "as a simple juxtaposition of values . . . would be to underestimate the sophistication of McCarthy's insight into the nature of the relationship between two countries" (121). Monk foregrounds the fact that crossing the border does not simply represent a contact with otherness, but rather, it is a complex geopolitical relation between two nations that are often at odds with each other. Moreover, Monk accentuates how ethnic encounter challenges cultural discourse. Again, while I consider Monk's work useful, even foundational, it does not prioritize questions of ecology, and therefore, differs from my own analysis.

The final scholar of note in the border functions category is Ellis, who marks a shift in the primacies of that scholarly discourse. Though he looks primarily to *Blood Meridian*, a different textual focus from Blair and Monk, his exploration of the border more closely resembles my own, though it still lacks some of the bioregional elements. He argues, "McCarthy ultimately renders space into place through enigmatic yet historical details, describing the coterminous lines of three salient events in the West: the near complete genocide of a people, the nearly complete extermination of an animal, and the realization . . . of an abstraction bringing space into the order of place" (85-6). That is, the displacement of indigenous tribes and the extermination of the bison occurred because of American imperial hegemony and its consequent abstraction of the border space. It is no longer a material place in which nature and culture cooperate, but a space for breeding false cultural mythology.

Ellis' assumptions come very close to my own, but his focus differs somewhat from mine. He interrogates the imposition of imperial power, which is not completely foreign to my analysis of McCarthy, but I look at that imposition in light of bioregional concerns.

Lastly, bioregional criticism is an emergent field in McCarthy studies. Most notably, David Gugin, Kate Montague, and Petra Mundik include some of the most innovative analyses in their works. Their scholarship points to new directions in McCarthy scholarship and their ideas impact much of my own analysis. Each of these scholars, whose works look both to *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, argue, as Gugin puts it, that "it is ecologically impossible to exist without context. The human species is context, place" (84). I adopt that same theoretical premise in my own work.

Montague and Mundik both focus on the environmental stylistics of *Blood Meridian*. Whereas Montague approaches the novel with bioregionalism in mind, Mundik largely reads Leo Daugherty's gnostic interpretation of the novel with its ecological implications in mind. Entering into dialogue with Daugherty, Mundik writes, "The desolate landscapes through which McCarthy's characters wander serve as symbolic projections of spiritual desolation" (30). In agreement with Daugherty's interpretation, she takes McCarthy's world understood through Gnosticism to its ecological conclusions. *Blood Meridian* does not envision a bioregional world, a world in which the complex interrelations of nature and culture are at the forefront, but a world in which the materiality of nature indicates a spiritual decay. In that sense, *Blood Meridian*'s fundamental constructions of the natural world resist ecological readings. I depart from Mundik's interpretation and align more closely with Montague's criticism.

Montague's scholarship explicitly takes into account the ecological consequences of cultural mythology and the enshrinement of the frontier myth. She writes, "The book [*Blood Meridian*] is about the earliest expansions of American hegemony, when capital first established its home on American soil and enlisted its own batch of nationalist myths" (96). From a theoretical standpoint, Montague's approach most closely resembles my own. However, my research design diverges from hers in that I look less to the baroque aesthetics of the novel to configure landscape and national myth, and instead set my sights on the sociohistorical conditions that the novel references.

Notably, Gugin's ecocritical investigation of *All the Pretty Horses* is one of few in a body of scholarship that draws little notice compared to *Blood Meridian*, though it is just as valuable in many ways. In an already limited scholarly debate, his environmental articulations sound almost like a lone voice. Perhaps too much of the ecocritical attention goes to *Blood Meridian*. In that context, Gugin offers, "Bioregionalism thus articulates an ongoing process of renewal, resistance, and reimagination, which is exactly how John Grady Cole views his life on and relationship to his grandfather's west Texas ranch, his home in every sense of the word" (85). That is, because of John Grady's views, the novel affords a bioregional reading. I agree with Gugin's argument. However, I expand his approach to encompass *Blood Meridian* and the whole *Border Trilogy*.

This overview of pertinent theoretical frameworks and important McCarthy scholarship enables me to enter into a dialogue of robust debate, dialectic contention, and emergent ecocritical thought. I insert my own critical intervention into the discussion by incorporating natureculture into bioregional theory and applying it to McCarthy's construction of the border space. In other words, natureculture proves beneficial to

bioregional theory because, at its most fundamental level, it is a term concerned with how nature and culture mutually constitute each other, which is one of the chief focuses of bioregionalism, a body of theory that explores how spaces transforms into place, or how nature forms culture and culture often reshapes nature. Furthermore, McCarthy's border region is a rich space to explore the implications and inner workings of natureculture as a concept coopted by ecocritical theory. Together, I join natureculture and the Unites States-Mexico border to propose new ways of reading McCarthy's western novels as cultural productions that foreground the complex interplay of cultural myth, sociopolitical realities, violent conflict, and environmental abuse.

Chapter 1

The Implement and the Suzerain:

Blood Meridian and Ecological Domination

I begin my work on *Blood Meridian* (1985) not where McCarthy starts his novel, with a description of the kid's childhood taste for violence, but with the epilogue, the brief, perplexing, and imagistic account of a man striking fire out of holes he is digging in the Southwest plains. McCarthy writes, "In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there" (351). This double-handled implement is simply a posthole digger, which, in the case of this epilogue, suits the purpose of constructing fences or forming boundaries along the United States-Mexico border. The etymological origins of the word implement illuminate the significance of this unnamed man's activity even further. Implement derives from the Latin verb "implere," meaning "to fill up," and also from the noun "implementum," which is "a filling up, or fulfillment" ("Implement"). Upon a closer look, it becomes obvious that this particular implement's purpose is not to fill up, but first to remove and then to replace with an object alien to the original composition of the land. Such a symbolic action of the removal and the refilling with something foreign characterizes much of *Blood Meridian*'s larger narrative, and it also constitutes the conceptual basis for my argument. In my rendering, the implement is the mechanism or tool that enables and assists imperial expansion, oppression, and production of power. In bioregional terms and in reference to natureculture—Donna Haraway's theoretical term that does not conceive of nature and culture as two separate, distinct categories—the

implement violently amputates, rends, and bifurcates nature from culture. Because of the implement's function—to remove earth and to refill the hole with a foreign object that did not previously exist in that space by natural means—I draw a connection between the violence enforced by human implementation and ecological domination in *Blood Meridian*.

The implement in general, a tool that enforces concrete action with abstract consequences, enables domination by its division of nature and culture, place and space. By applying abstract principles of control to the natural world, the user of this tool writes an absurd and contradictory narrative of cultivation. That is, enculturation rends the material world and the world of human institution into two distinct, binary categories: nature and culture as separate from each other. Another important feature of the epilogue, one that speaks to the issue of nature and culture as arbitrarily assigned classifications, is the inclusion of "the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search" who "move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet" (351). Escapement and pallet are mechanisms of the typewriter, implements of the author. The monitoring of these wanderers by the typewriter reveals that those who search for bones and those who do not search "appear constrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality" (351). In this manner, the authorial implement's function is to make human action seem like it is constrained by some guiding principle when it in fact has none. The typewriter, as an implement, removes the chaos of the material world and replaces it with an appearance of order, a façade of structure and meaning.

Furthermore, tracking the movement of the wanderers uncovers yet another absurdity and contradiction in the function of the implement. The wanderers "cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less

the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie" (351). Eerily resembling the chain of signification, the sequential order of the holes in the ground seems to offer an understanding of the world that is ordered, principled, and cultivated by human hands. But that is just the image, rather, the illusion formed by the process of implementation. All this sequence of holes in the ground accomplishes is a removal of the material and a refilling with an image of false significance, false order, and a false grab at control. The falsehood of these categories lies in their artificiality and the fact that they owe their existence to the bifurcation of natureculture, which is inherently an abstraction from the material world.

My reading of the epilogue is somewhat contrarian or at least resistant to the popular interpretations of this strange passage. For example, Harold Bloom interprets the Promethean imagery of striking fire out of the holes as a resistance to the narrative of the gods, or, rather, a resistance to Judge Holden, the novel's antagonist whose monumental evil permeates the entire text. Bloom posits, "Perhaps all the reader can surmise with some certainty is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the West. The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him" (xv). However, such a reading ignores the fact that the act of digging holes in a sequence to verify a principle of sequence and causality is merely an imitation of the judge himself. The delineation of boundaries and the categorization and separation of inseparable categories, namely, nature and culture, is a continuation of the judge's own practices, an attempt to bend the world under human institutional dominance. The text does not extol the efforts of the man digging holes in the epilogue. Rather, it

subverts his project by drawing attention to the fact that it has no inner reality. McCarthy describes the man's project as having no inner reality because it is just an image of abstraction, an illusory game that results in catastrophic violence. The man digging the holes is not acting in defiance of the gods as Prometheus did before him. He is carrying on the same practices as the gods, placing the natural world under his rule. The epilogue represents not a defiance of power, but instead, a sort of transferal of power between the gods of the mythical history and the gods of US American imperialism.

I devote so much attention to a one-page passage that occurs at the end of the novel and after the conclusive action of the plot, because the concept of the implement is useful for framing and interpreting the events of this dense and difficult novel. Moreover, the action of removing and refilling, the function of the posthole digger and the subsequent installment of a fencepost, symbolizes many of the most extravagant instances of violence in *Blood Meridian*. The removal of Mexican sovereignty from the US American Southwest and its replacement with the sociopolitical domination of the United States in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War serve as the historical backdrop of the novel and are the most immediate examples of the implement at work. The Glanton Gang's indiscriminate massacres of the people living in the border region are an extension of US American imperialist implementation. The gang's illicit and perverse use of the land to create gunpowder under the instruction and oversight of the judge only confirms how implementation separates nature and culture. Most of all, the judge writes in his catalogue, in which he records every new piece of information he comes across, as a tool to bend nature to his will by acquiring it in his bank of knowledge, a mechanism by which he can establish his suzerainty. Each of these moments in the text provides valuable insight into the ways in

which the implement drives the narrative of dominance and violence; they are also the primary loci of inquiry for my analysis.

Before I launch into that inquiry further, some theoretical background is necessary. First, Donna Haraway's respective works on technology and natureculture inform how I view the relationship between nature, culture, and the tools adopted to perpetuate both cultural myth and political power. Second, Gloria Anzaldúa's critique of the United States' history of settler colonialism in the border region historicizes the violence that happens when dominant political powers form and establish borders. Finally, recent developments in ecocritical thought interrogate the bifurcation of nature and culture and the mechanisms that cause that division. There are substantial overlaps between each theoretical mode that are significant in the discourse of violence in *Blood Meridian*, which is why it is necessary to spend some time investigating important concepts on technology, myth and history, and environmental domination.

Haraway aids in the unraveling of the complex relationship between the tool, nature, history, and myth that enables the violence inherent in McCarthy's rendering of the American Southwest. Theorizing how tools and myth coexist, Haraway argues that tools "should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meaning. The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other" ("A Cyborg Manifesto" 33). In my own parlance, cultural myth forms the implement, but also, such mythology is subject to the processes of implementation. Refractive and symbiotic, the implement and cultural myth establish each other and consist in their mutual relationship, the connection that allows institutions like the

United States Army and figures like John Joel Glanton and Judge Holden to incorporate myth and tool into their schemes of expansionist violence.

At this point, a discussion of Haraway's concept of natureculture is pertinent because it does not make an arbitrary division between the two respective categories—nature and culture; instead, the mechanism that simultaneously authorizes that division and blurs the subsequent boundary is the tool or the implement. She reasons, "Biological and cultural determinism are both instances of misplaced concreteness—i.e., the mistake of, first, taking provisional and local category abstractions like 'nature' and 'culture' for the world and, second, mistaking potent consequences to be preexisting foundations" ("Companion Species Manifesto" 98). Put otherwise, by a misunderstanding of nature and culture as distinct, irreducible categories, humans express an anthropomorphic tendency to distinguish the two classifications as concrete, static, or set in stone. I challenge this distinction in my analysis of *Blood Meridian*, which is why I, like Haraway, elect to bind the two terms together to draw attention to natureculture. From this discourse, it becomes evident that the tool, or the implement, can be used to either blur the boundary between nature and culture, or it can create an even greater division. In the case of McCarthy's work, the implement widens the gap of the nature/culture dichotomy and enhances the violence inherent in such a widening motion.

The concept of the implement does not just find support in Haraway's theoretical exploration, but it also has historical precedents in US American settler colonialism. A study of settler colonialism is distinct from more traditional colonial studies largely through the ways each respective mode of inquiry positions geography. Popularized understandings of European colonialism tend to divide the colonizer and the colonized with an ocean. Settler

colonial studies adopts a continental model: imperial conquest can occur without having to travel across an ocean. Lorenzo Veracini proposes that "the study of settler colonialism is necessarily premised on the realisation that colonialism does not always arrive on boats and that settlers typically act on their own behalf, not as agents of distant metropoles. Settlers characteristically arrive in their wagon trains, and the study of *their* colonialism is premised on the parallel realisation that they rarely sail away" (2). In the context of the United States, the nation's history can be characterized by a settler model after independence from Britain. More narrowly, the history of US American settler colonialism is the history of *Blood Meridian*.

As the majority of the novel is set in 1849, the two most relevant instances of settler history that shape *Blood Meridian*'s narrative trajectory are the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the war but complicates US-Mexican relations to this day. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo receives the most attention, because it ratified the new border between the United States and Mexico that still exists. Alongside the Louisiana Purchase, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is one of the largest land acquisitions in the United States' history. To secure that acquisition permanently, one of the major stipulations of the treaty was that the "Boundary line established by this Article shall be religiously respected by each of the two republics, and no change shall ever be made therein, except by the express and free consent of both nations, lawfully given by the General Government of each, in conformity with its own constitution" (Article V). The significance of this treaty in the current discussion lies in the settler colonial expansion of the United States government via the implementation of a border. Harold Bloom offers an astute observation regarding the historical backdrop of *Blood Meridian*: "None of its carnage is

gratuitous or redundant; it belonged to the Mexico-Texas borderlands in 1849-50" (viii). That is to say, the novel's violence is not McCarthy's indulgence, but an unflinching observation of the region's history, an account of the chaos and disorder caused by US American intervention and expansion westward.

Gloria Anzaldúa's border theory builds its foundation on the history of the United States' practice of settler colonialism. Anzaldúa writes that the Battle of the Alamo, the most famous battle of the Mexican-American War, "became (and still is) a symbol that legitimized the white imperialist takeover" (28). The symbolization of white imperialism is evidenced by when "U.S. troops invaded and occupied Mexico, forcing her to give up almost half of her nation, what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California" (29). This removal of Mexican sovereignty and its subsequent replacement with US American governance substantiate Anzaldúa's claim that "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25). The acquisition of new land and the placement of a border, according to Anzaldúa, are unnatural, and, to use my own phrasing, enact a process of implementation, with the border itself as an implement, the mechanism that removes Mexican power and people and replaces it with white US American interests, political governance, and people.

With the implement, Haraway's natureculture, settler colonial history, and Anzaldúa's border theory in mind, we can trace out the profound environmental implications of *Blood Meridian* by viewing the United States-Mexico border as a distinct bioregion. David Barnhill posits that bioregionalism "assumes an interweaving of humans and nature,

emphasizing the value of nature while also emphasizing human life within nature, making use of nature as one of its parts rather than merely contemplating it from the outside" (212). This definition of bioregionalism is reminiscent of natureculture in that it views the boundary between nature and culture as arbitrary and false; human life is not outside of nature nor is nature unaffected by human action. In that regard, "the bioregional habitat we identify with, then, involves not merely physical space but also social structures, economic systems, problems, and utopian potentials" (Barnhill 213). Moreover, the bioregional model propounds environmental particularity. The locus of inquiry is not general or global ecology, but is instead a particular region, the Texas-Mexico borderlands in the case of *Blood Meridian*. The question is one of universality and singularity. We do not occupy an abstract space, but a place in which the material conditions of life are not separated into distinct categories of nature and culture. Any sort of boundary or border between those two classifications is an instantiation of implementation, an abstracting of place and space. Such categorization exposes the violence that seems native to the border space in *Blood Meridian* as, in fact, not native at all, but an unnatural result of the implement in action.

Bioregional theory is not impermeable, however. Lawrence Buell notes that "space as against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction" (63). That is, conceiving of place and space is in danger of splitting nature and culture as well. Buell continues, "Not attending to this reciprocity of nature and culture, one misconstrues one's place in space and how it came to be" (66). Buell does not disqualify the idea of place versus space, but instead, he directs our attention to a human propensity for anthropocentrism and the dangers therein. He writes, "But taking a good thing too far (place-attachment and stewardship at the local level) manifestly can produce bad results too: maladaptive sedentariness, inordinate

hankering to recover the world we have lost, xenophobic stigmatization of outsiders and wanderers" (68). A bioregional approach to a text, then, first and foremost, must be careful to not overextend its anthropomorphic understanding of the world or give too much importance to place-attachment.

My purpose in bringing the theory of natureculture, the history of settler colonialism, border theory, and bioregionalism into conversation is to intervene in a complex discourse by using *Blood Meridian* as a case study for new ways of thinking about reading texts ecologically through the lens of historical and political violence and through the affordances of diverse theories. I am primarily concerned with how such an environmental approach can interact with, interrogate, and interpret a literary text. On that matter, "It is . . . clear that the subject of a text's representation of its environmental ground *matters*—matters aesthetically, conceptually, ideologically. Language never replicates extratextual landscapes, but it can be bent toward or away from them" (Buell 33). By adopting an environmental approach to the text, I do not aim to explore the theoretical boundaries of the text outside of language, nor is my goal to critique the extralinguistic, concrete representation of real landscapes in *Blood Meridian*. Instead, I aim to bend both theory and McCarthy criticism landward, not to ignore the impossibility of neutral mimetic representation of the material world, but to direct critical attention toward the world. *Blood Meridian*'s textual landscapes provide an excellent opportunity to put that practice into action.

With the theoretical and historical foundation laid, I move forward to the text itself. My primary objects of inquiry in *Blood Meridian* are the continuing intervention of the United States military after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and a character analysis of Judge Holden as a force of domination. McCarthy's inclusion of the United States' military

abuse after the end of the war highlights the disordered violence that attends such an intrusion. It also holds profound ecological and social implications through its rupture of nature and culture. An analysis of the judge reveals that no implement functions without its suzerain, its master, its lord. Mechanisms of domination require a sovereign operator, like powerful sociopolitical figures or even entire economic systems like capitalism, to accomplish the purpose of removal and replacement inherent to the implement. I propose that the judge's function in the novel is to utilize the implement on its grandest scale: in the domination of all material reality.

The activity of the United States Army in *Blood Meridian* exemplifies implementation and ecological domination. At the beginning of the novel, McCarthy provides a seemingly minor detail that the kid, the novel's principle character "in the spring of the year eighteen and forty-nine . . . rides up through the latterday republic of Fredonia into the town of Nacogdoches" (5). However, the detail of the date in which the kid travels to Nacogdoches is a vital one that contextualizes the whole narrative. 1849 is a year after the Mexican-American War ended and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. The violence and chaos incurred by US American expansion and the formation of the border was still ripening and at one of its most critical points. The kid's conscription into the Army during this year is not just consequential background information, but a foundation for the kid's story.

There is considerable scholarly contention surrounding the issue of history in McCarthy's novel. Bloom writes, "I suppose one could call *Blood Meridian* 'a historical novel' . . . Yet it does not have the aura of historical fiction, since what it depicts seethes on, in the United States, and nearly everywhere else, as we enter the third millennium" (viii).

Bloom's reluctance to consider the historicity of *Blood Meridian* stems from his focus on what he perceives as the novel's transcendent sublimity akin to the fiction of Herman Melville and William Faulkner. The romantic tradition certainly contributes to the artistic creation of McCarthy's work, but it does not do so at the expense of the history of US American conquest in the borderlands. Artistic production and history do not exclude each other by necessity.

Similarly, Timothy Parrish recognizes the relevance of history to the study of McCarthy's western novels while expressing some doubts concerning the effectiveness of an entirely historical analysis of those novels. Parrish articulates,

> McCarthy's novels assume that history in both its broadest and most minute sense informs the actions of his characters, but the precise knowledge of that history is never as important as the characters' immediate perception of their own individual fates, usually experienced in moments of shattering violence. Indisputably American in style and theme, McCarthy's western novels are finally too broad in scope to be reduced merely to American history. (68)

Scholars with Parrish's approach to McCarthy value the place of history in his novels, but that history is always secondary to the novels' protagonists' understanding of themselves within that historical moment.

Though I agree with Bloom's and Parrish's concerns over the limitations of a purely historical reading of *Blood Meridian*, my own critical intervention acknowledges the vast affordances of how historical moments, particularly the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, inform the political, racial, and environmental violence that pervades McCarthy's work. To clarify, I do not make any claims about how the novel

represents history as it really was; instead, I view history as a kind of link between violence and the literary text. Walter Benjamin's prominent work "On the Concept of History" (1940) offers a solution for understanding the operative function of history in McCarthy's border fiction. Benjamin argues, "The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again" (390). History cannot be understood "'the way it really was'" (Benjamin 391), because humans cannot see time as the angel of history does, as "one singular catastrophe" (Benjamin 392). The goal of a study of history should be to seize images of the past as their presence reverberates in the now. *Blood Meridian* does not depict the past as a stable, uncontested sequence, but as an image of violence arrested in the literary text. My approach to history is similar in that I trace the ways in which McCarthy deploys historical images to probe the manifestations of human violence in the border region.

The portion of the novel that follows the kid's excursion with the Army, though brief, symptomatizes the broader themes of historical, social, and environmental violence in *Blood Meridian*. During the kid's interview when he goes to enlist, Captain White, the commanding officer, pontificates, "There is no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them" (36). Captain White exposes himself as a proponent of implementation. He views the Mexican people as homogeneous, inferior, and unable to self-govern. Under this violent logic, the United States government must remove Mexican sovereignty from the borderlands and refill the remaining hole with its own governance. This process can only bring with it violence, violence directed at the land and at those who inhabit it.

Racist dispositions toward the Mexican people and their government demonstrate the tensions of life on the border. US American expansionist rhetoric erases non-white American people, or people unaligned with white American political interests, of their legitimacy as citizens and as people. Anzaldúa astutely observes that on the border the "only 'legitimate' inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with the whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus" (25-26). Stripped of their agency, the enemies of the United States' settler colonial interests, the people who, as Captain White claims, are incapable of governing themselves, experience the violent tension that terrorizes the borderlands, which are themselves a formulation of imperial power and settler expansion. In that regard, the border is a site of unequal power dynamics in which the removal of Mexican sovereignty and its replacement with that of the United States exemplify the process of implementation. By amputating people from the land they inhabit, especially during the historical context of *Blood Meridian*, the United States Army severed relations of nature and culture, place and space, humans and the environment.

Captain White's extralegal, or, more appropriately, illegal campaign against Mexico operates without the consent of Mexico or the United States government, at least officially. Not only does Captain White lead a military excursion into Mexico in 1849, a year after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but the men he commands express that many of them have occupied Mexican land since before the Mexican-American War. The soldier who introduces the kid to Captain White explains, "I been in Texas since thirty-eight" (32). This soldier lived on Mexican land illegally until joining up with Captain White during the war. To recapitulate, Captain White commands a military unit that operates after the signing of the peace treaty and consists of soldiers who migrated to Mexican territories illegally before the

war even started. In fact, this migration into Mexican land was one of the principle causes of the war: "In the 1800s, Anglos migrated illegally into Texas, which was then part of Mexico, in greater and greater numbers and gradually drove the *tejanos* (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands committing all manner of atrocities against them. Their illegal invasion forced Mexico to fight a war to keep its Texas territory" (Anzaldúa 28). History subverts and dismantles Captain White's claims to U.S. American superiority. His narrative is not one founded on the real conditions of the world, but on the false mythological narratives of his own cultural production.

McCarthy's novel correlates cultural narratives and myths with manifestations of political, racial, and environmental violence. Captain White's description of Mexican land under Mexican rule versus his description of the same land in the hands of his soldiers exemplifies the concomitance between myth and violence. In an effort to entice the kid into joining the Army, he explains, "We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land" (37). This single sentence deserves substantial unpacking. First, the captain identifies himself and his soldiers as instruments. Arguably, we could substitute the word instrument with implement here and the statement would have the same effect. The army, under the command of Captain White, operates like a tool with the purpose of violently removing the land from the people, thus creating a vacuum, a hole which must be refilled with new people, white settlers. Second, the soldiers are not just instruments, but instruments of liberation. They justify their violent implementation by their own sort of cultural mythology, the narrative of the rugged individual settlers seizing a wild and uncontrollable land in order to subject it to their will, gifting an unorganized land with an organizing principle. Finally, the captain describes the land where his men will be instruments of

liberation as dark and troubled. Rather, it is dark and troubled under Mexican rule. It is a land that requires white American hands to cultivate and refine. Combined, the individual elements of Captain White's statement could be refigured to say, "We are to be implements of violence that we justify by our false cultural mythology in a land that we desire for ourselves, but we can only seize it through acts of the aforementioned violence." Essentially, the captain's statement euphemizes the US American domination of the borderlands.

The subsequent portions of Captain White's speech warrant just as much critical attention because they expose the impetus for the captain's desire to dominate the land: it can be monetized. Seducing the kid to enlist in his project, the captain divulges, "And we will be the ones who divide the spoils. There will be a section of land for every man in my company. Fine grassland. Some of the finest in the world. A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation" (37). To reiterate, the borderlands are only dark, troubled, miasmatic almost, because the people who occupy and govern them are not white Americans. According to Captain White's logic, if the Army succeeds in removing Mexican sovereignty from the borderlands, then the land will transform into a state of richness, vibrancy, and vitality. The actual history of US American involvement in the borderlands exposes the fictionality of Captain White's narrative and, in turn, reveals that the "Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it" (Anzaldúa 29). The land itself already contains the richness that Captain White describes, but he renders it dark, troubled, and miasmal because non-white people live there. The goal of Captain White and the Army, as implements of domination, is to seize the richness of the land for the settlers and subjugate that region of the world to the settlers' wills.

Conceived of as a bioregion, the borderland's social structures, economic systems, and political problems as they relate to the concept of place fall subject to the dominance imposed by settler colonialism. The violence of the novel, written in mystical and transcendent language reminiscent of Melville and the American Romantic tradition, has a historical referent: the separation of nature and culture via warfare and settler colonialism. US American expansion had implications, bioregionally speaking, that still echo in our current ecological and political climate. If, as Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armburster argue, "Bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings—our local bioregion—rather than, or at least supplementary to, national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of identity" (4), then the maneuvers of Captain White, the Army, and the United States government in *Blood Meridian* undermine the bioregional way of life through its anthropocentric, even more narrowly, anglocentric positioning of worldly authority. Expansionist violence, as exhibited by Captain White and his soldiers, runs contrary to bioregionalism because it renders the human identity as superior to and other than the larger community of natural beings. In the model of Captain White, human dwelling is not with and within the rest of nature but is, instead, in a locale that is above and imposing over nature.

Captain White, however, is just a shadow of Judge Holden. The judge's desire for domination extends beyond the local confines of regional land acquisition in the borderlands; his project is to dominate the entirety of the material world. Because of his pursuits, the judge aims to declare himself a suzerain. When Toadvine asks the judge why he would substitute the term suzerain for keeper, the judge responds, "Because he [the suzerain] is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands

local judgments" (207). The suzerain is the one who operates the implement, the one who claims authority to remove the earth with his mechanisms of power and replace with his own devices at his own discretion. Notably, the suzerain is a masculine figure whose quest for dominance resonates with the United States' settler and expansionist policies during the Nineteenth Century. Suzerainty connotes a masculine form of authority that distances nature and culture, place and space, human and the community of life.

Like the word implement, the etymological origins of the word suzerain bear substantial importance in *Blood Meridian*. An archaic and obscure word, suzerain originates from the Latin "susum," meaning above or up, and "versum," the past participle of "vertere," which is to turn. Together "susum" and "versum" literally mean overturned ("Suzerain"). Ultimately, the title designates the power to overturn a legal or juridical decision. Just as the implement overturns the earth and replaces it, the suzerain overturns the law and replaces it with his own judgment. It is important that the judge applies masculinity to this word, because the authority ascribed to the suzerain fundamentally relies on a white, masculine, and colonial discourse of power in the context of US expansion into formerly Mexican territory. Suzerain also has some relation to the word sovereign ("Suzerain"). All in all, the suzerain is a sovereign overlord, a total master over a domain who is completely independent of all other authority. As a title, suzerain indicates absolute mastery over the world in *Blood Meridian*.

The judge, as the aspiring suzerain, is a divisive figure in McCarthy scholarship. To some, he represents the Gnostic archon, the evil lesser god who rules over the material world. For the archon, the material world is his domain, and, as such, the natural world is imbued with his evil. Such a model promotes platonic form-ideal dualism. To others, the judge's

power indicates the absolute materiality of the natural world. There is no metaphysical reality, just a physical reality. In this model, the material, natural world is indifferent to the cultural constructions of humanity. Other figurations of the judge often fall somewhere between the two poles.[1] I enter into this debate with a different approach, with the indivisibility of natureculture and the bioregion in mind.

Most McCarthy criticism leans in the direction of the Gnosticism argument, though often with additional caveats to that construction, which is often viewed as too narrowly focused. Referencing this point of view, Bloom agrees that "McCarthy gives Judge Holden the powers and purposes of the bad angels or demiurges that the Gnostics, but he tells us not to make such an identification" as "any 'system,' including the Gnostic one, will not divide the Judge back into his origins" (xi-xii). Bloom, conferring that the judge holds archonic power, does not actually attribute the title of Archon to the judge because that term gives a category to a character that the novel denies any possibility of categorization. Likewise, Steven Frye admits that there are some gnostic elements to the novel, but he also accords for the opposite possibility. He writes,

> In *Blood Meridian*, he [McCarthy] adopts and modifies the narrative strategies of Melville and Dostoyevsky by giving voice to multiple perspectives. The

[1] See the literature review section of this thesis for my analysis of the Gnosticism-materialism debate. For a more in-depth understanding of this scholarly discussion see Leo Daugherty's essay "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy" and Steven Shaviro's "'The Very Life of Darkness': A Reading of Blood Meridian." Daugherty's argument in favor of the gnostic interpretation of the novel views the judge's aspiration toward suzerainty as a desire to become an archon, the malignant lesser god of gnostic theology who rules over the material world, while the benevolent supreme God only rules the spiritual realm. Shaviro's argument occupies the polar opposite end of the spectrum from Daugherty. To Shaviro, the nature of the world is purely material; the materiality of McCarthy's world is incomprehensible in its magnitude, which would explain the seemingly spiritual and inexplicable qualities of the violent scenes McCarthy depicts.

> possibility of a universe absent of transcendent meaning is considered, together with the present potential of a creation dominated by evil. But alive as well in the world of *Blood Meridian* is the ubiquitous 'voice' that binds the physical and spiritual into mysterious unity. (67)

Of all of the critical perspectives, Frye's is perhaps the most nuanced due to his close attention to the novel's philosophical dialogue. The novel rarely, if ever, answers any questions about the physical and metaphysical principles of the world. Instead, it just continues to ponder the possibilities of how the world works.

Though none of these scholars has any environmental possibilities in mind—most write of landscapes in their more abstract relation to philosophy—their work does lay the foundation for ecocritical inquiry. The question of Gnosticism versus pure materialism forces us to consider what nature is and what it does in *Blood Meridian*. From my perspective, Frye's advancement of a dialogic model of competing voices offers the most critical opportunities, which is why I align most closely with his scholarship. Because there are so many voices, uttering contradictory claims about nature, the novel contains many interpretive points of entry, numerous critical trajectories. Through this model of competing voices, I intervene with a claim that the construction of nature in *Blood Meridian* can be considered from a bioregional perspective where the broader habitat of the Texas-Mexico border undergoes processes of human domination, which then manifest in profoundly violent environmental abuse.

Via my own critical intervention, Judge Holden emblematizes the processes of human ecological domination. As a suzerain-aspirant, he perpetrates environmental violence with his various implements. One of the most grievous accounts of the judge's dominating violence

occurs during a story told by Tobin—an ex-priest and acquaintance of the kid in the Glanton Gang—in which the judge instructs the gang on how to create gunpowder while a band of Native American warriors chases them. Tobin recalls how the judge creates the mixture,

> He worked it up dry with his hands and . . . the judge was standin, the great hairless oaf, and he'd took out his pizzle and he was pissin into the mixture, pissin with a great vengeance and one hand aloft he cried out for us to do likewise . . . We hauled forth our members and at it we went and the judge on his knees kneadin the mass with his naked arms and the piss was splashin about and he was crying out to us to piss, man, piss for your very souls for cant you see the redskins yonder, and laughin all the while workin up this great mass in a foul black dough, a devils batter by the stink of it. (138)

Grotesque and nearly perverse, Tobin's memory of the experience of creating gunpowder accurately characterizes the judge's will to power. A repulsive urinary revelry, this scene invokes disgust and dismay over the abusive mistreatment of the earth. The judge's rule, already operating under an anthropocentric understanding of nature, perverts, abuses, and bends nature under his dominating will.

Notably, this depiction of the judge's and the Glanton Gang's frenzied pissing holds an analogic relation to one of the most canonized works in Western literature: John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. *Blood Meridian*, an erudite novel rife with intertextuality, is often compared to the works of Melville, Faulkner, and Milton. However, the comparison to Milton usually places the judge next to Satan as a figure representative of heroic evil. My comparison to Milton directs us to the war in Heaven that leads to Satan's expulsion to Hell. In Book VI of *Paradise Lost*, the angel Raphael recounts for Adam the story of the battle against Satan and

his angels and describes an event similar to that of Tobin's story of the judge's creation of gunpowder. Raphael describes Satan and his rebellious army to Adam,

Forthwith from Council to work they flew,
None arguing stood, innumerable hands
Were ready, in a moment up they turn'd
Wide the Celestial soil, and saw beneath
Th' originals of Nature in thir crude
Conception; Sulphurous and Nitrous Foam
They found, they mingl'd, and with subtle Art
Concocted and adusted they reduc'd
To blackest grain, and into store convey'd. (VI. 507-515)

In this passage, Raphael depicts the creation of gunpowder by the perversion of heavenly resources. Pertinently, the demons turn the celestial soil upwards. They overturn the heavenly materials to form something new and profane. Their actions are reminiscent of the overturning function of both the implement and the suzerain. Elsewhere in Book VI, Milton describes the weapons that the rebellious angels fill with this perverse creation as machinations and instruments, which, in my own parlance, are implements. By defiling heavenly soil, Satan reveals the violence of his quest for domination and control. The exertion of power, with the aid of an implement, defiles and profanes the natural world. This defilement of nature extends and echoes into all areas of life. It is an irreversible action whose effects change the world permanently. I argue that this scene from *Paradise Lost* is a valuable analogue to *Blood Meridian* because its illustration of the dangers of violence toward nature resonates with McCarthy's novel thematically. It tells the story of an enigmatic

leader with a devoted following whose quest for control regularly results in catastrophe and desolation. Just as Satan's creation of gunpowder violates heavenly soil, Judge Holden's urinary mixture abuses earthly soil. In either case, the despoiling directly causes ecological disaster.

Consequently, the actions of those aspiring toward suzerainty aided by their implements, particularly the judge with his catalogue and with his grotesque gunpowder, decimate the land. Regarding *Blood Meridian*, suzerainty and implementation offer one reason why the borderlands are characterized by desolation and waste. For example, McCarthy writes, "They [Captain White and the Army] rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring plainwise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus" (47). The land of the border space is land subjugated to the phallic power of the suzerain. The region becomes blood-soaked and barren because of the horrific actions of powerful institutions like the United States Army and powerful people like the judge. Petra Mundik, similarly to Daugherty and other defenders of *Blood Meridian'*s Gnosticism, contends that "McCarthy confronts the reader with an anticosmic (or world-rejecting) attitude toward existence and creation, readily apparent in the novel's depiction of surreal, nightmarish landscapes and skyscapes" (29). Such a reaction to the horrific landscapes littering the novel is sensible in the critical trajectory that favors the gnostic view. However, as Frye observes, *Blood Meridian* is a dialogic novel, a cacophony of competing voices and heteroglossia. The voices of the demiurges are not the only ones to be heard. The brutality, barrenness, and waste of the novel's landscapes do not have to be "symbolic projections of spiritual desolation" (Mundik

30). They can also be material manifestations of environmental desolation caused by war, settler expansion, and other forms of human violence.

Cruel and barren, McCarthy's world indicates the spiritual death of humanity, but it also reflects the irreparable damage done by human hands. When the kid rides through the plains under the command of Captain White, just before the brutal massacre of the Army at the hands of the Comanche, the descriptions of the landscape both illustrate and prefigure human violence. The land exhibits its scars gained by a history of extensive human violence, and it also gestures toward violence that will happen in the future. Captain White's party "rode through a region electric and wild" with the "mountains stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear" (49). Fearsome and cacophonous, the borderlands experience human violence and reverse bloodshed and violence back onto all forms of life in the bioregion. A world where suzerains dominate and defile the land with their implements reciprocates such destruction. The world visits human violence back upon us.

Here, we must return to history, or rather the confluence of myth and history to make sense of the environmental and geopolitical violence that saturates the novel and its landscapes. The object of *Blood Meridian*'s narrative, according to Kate Montague, "is neither myth nor actuality, but their complicated entanglement: their historical inseparability" (102). Under this construction, the novel's violence does not have to adhere to an understanding of the novel that interprets the landscapes' desolation as indicating mythic spiritual barrenness, nor does it have to adhere to actual material bleakness. Together, the myth and history of the borderlands are entwined, and the style with which McCarthy characterizes them "formally refracts the historical reality of frontier violence," and we can

see that "its bloody actuality surpasses whatever myth seeks to contain it" (Montague 101). In both a past and a present where the myths of American Exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, the Pristine Myth, and the Frontier Myth justify settler expansion in the borderlands, the actual bloodshed and violence that occurs because of these myths supersedes the false narratives of colonial rhetoric. The contact between myth and history scars and ruptures both the false narratives of imperial mythology and the relationship between humanity and the world.

Blood Meridian's interplay of history, mythology, and violence sets the scene for the narratives of the novels that comprise the Border Trilogy. For those later works, *Blood Meridian* is the mythological and historical source text, the Nineteenth Century foundation for Twentieth Century echoes of violence. It is a primordial origin story whose reach still extends into more recent history. If *Blood Meridian* is the genesis of violence in the border region, then the border trilogy is the judgment for the human sins of violence, Native American genocide, and anthropocentric ecological domination.

In its own context, *Blood Meridian* speaks to the reciprocity of human institutions and the natural world. If humans commit violence against the land, there will be environmental consequences. McCarthy describes the borderlands as "the world beyond where all the land lay under darkness and all a great stained altarstone" (108). The image of the altarstone connotes a profane covenantal bond between those aspiring toward suzerainty and violence, a blasphemous site of brutal human sacrifice in which the violence of human suzerainty defiles the world. By invoking the altarstone, McCarthy suggests that humans and their offspring severed the relationship between nature and culture sometime in their primordial past, and now they live under a curse. Bloody, violent, and cursed, the borderlands of *Blood Meridian*

indicate a breach in human fidelity, a rejection of the relationship between nature and culture, a blood pact with sacrilegious anthropocentric dominance. Suzerains and their implements bring about this curse by removing humans from their communion with the natural world and refilling that void with bloodlust, ushering in sociopolitical domination and ecological devastation.

Chapter 2

The Tale and the Witness:

Knowing the World in the Border Trilogy

The Border Trilogy—consisting of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—implicitly carries over the imagery of the altarstone from *Blood Meridian* (1985). The trilogy's narrator rarely employs the metaphor of the altar in explicit terms except for a brief mention in *The Crossing* and Billy Parham's dream at the end of *Cities of the Plain*. However, the theme of a probationary curse, as it relates to the covenantal language of sacrifice and the ritual of the altarstone, resonates and echoes into the narratives of the Border Trilogy. Such resonances indicate a productive method of reading McCarthy's novels, as an oeuvre rather than individual works. Certainly, each of the novels within the trilogy can be read as separate works, and that kind of reading is necessary. Thematically, though, the concomitances between McCarthy's works open up the opportunity to interpret the texts as a united body of related imagery, philosophical and theological foundations, and inquiry into the dynamic interplay between nature and culture. As echoes of the covenantal-ecological motifs in *Blood Meridian*, the ongoing theme of the environmental curse and human separation from nature, the novels of the Border Trilogy reveal what happens to the world when the effects of the curse pile up over the course of history, as the environmental abuse incited by Judge Holden, the suzerain-aspirant, ripples into new historical moments.

Conceptually speaking, the probationary curse in the Border Trilogy lies under the surface and is implicit in the text, unlike its more overt presence in *Blood Meridian*. However, McCarthy still factors the curse into his narrative through the notion of the world

as tale. During a key passage in *The Crossing*, an ex-priest tells a story to Billy Parham, the novel's protagonist, about the journeys of a man seeking to understand the nature of God. In the middle of his story, the ex-priest interjects, "There is but one world and everything that is imaginable is necessary to it. For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them" (143). This passage speaks to the unity of all things in McCarthy's constructions of the world. Every event, every object, every living thing contains within it a tale that makes up the one tale, and there are traces of the one tale in all lesser tales. Likewise, each narrative of the individual novels in the Border Trilogy would then be lesser tales in that model. Later in this same passage, the ex-priest interrupts his own story again with a question: "If the world was a tale who but the witness could give it life?" (154). He implies that there is no transcendent teller. Only the witness can tell the tale of the world. In the schema of the Border Trilogy, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are witnesses, those whose tales vivify the world's tale. Not only are their narratives echoes of the greater tale as it manifests itself in *Blood Meridian*, but the stories of Billy and John Grady constitute lesser tales in the larger narrative of McCarthy's entire oeuvre. I propose that this understanding of the world and its narrative(s) holds profound implications for the ways in which we figure the natural world through history, stories, mythology, and the conflation of all three of those categories. This chapter interrogates and subverts a devotion to an ecologically devastating cultural mythology embedded in the history of the border region. I also explore how different modes of knowing the world, a central inquiry of environmental criticism, originate in historical and cultural representations of nature, not in actually living in communion with the world. These

historical and cultural representations actually divide nature and culture into two separate categories, a division that often serves as the impetus for and justification of ecological violence. The Border Trilogy serves as a productive case study for the exploration of McCarthy's images of violence on the border and their relation to that particular natureculture.

The way history operates in McCarthy's fiction poses a certain difficulty. If all is a tale, then history itself requires a witness, one who will give life to history's narratives. Here, Walter Benjamin's notion of the angel of history,[2] which he fleshes out in his incomplete essay "On the Concept of History" (1940), will help disentangle the quandary created by McCarthy's notion of the tale, the witness, and their respective roles in the telling of history. In this essay, Benjamin critiques a progressive model of history, which he considers to be the historical model of fascism. He views history as a singularity, a cataclysmic whole from which the historical materialist must blast out images of the past to combat bourgeois oppression. Describing the angel of history, Benjamin writes, "His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (392). The individual, lesser tales of this world are only individual chunks of debris that form the larger, singular catastrophe that is history, the world as tale.

But humans do not have the same abilities as the angel of history. We cannot see the singular pile of wreckage, but only a chain of events, history as a progression of unitary moments. However, Benjamin critiques the progressive model of history and instead posits a

[2] Benjamin's inspiration for the term angel of history comes from Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus* (1920).

more useful historical model: that of *Jetztzeit*, or, literally, now-time. He contends, "History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]" (395). To properly understand history, we must approach it as an indivisible whole, the entire past in its simultaneity. The task then of the historical materialist, the type of historiographer who follows Benjamin's model, is first to understand the past this way. Regarding the historical objects studied by the historical materialist, Benjamin writes, "He [the historical materialist] takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework" (396). That is, the historical materialist arrests an image of the past and studies it as a memory saturated with now-time, with the eternal now of history. If history is a singular catastrophe, that means what we artificially categorize as individual moments or events echo throughout the whole course of time. This collapsing of time into now-time implies eternal consequences for every action, every event, every lesser tale, to use McCarthy's terminology. It also enables a reading of McCarthy's fiction as an oeuvre because we can imagine the narratives of each novel as resonating and present in the narratives of the other works and then echoing into the one tale of the world, the single catastrophe of history in this body of literature.

The continuous reverberations of history in now-time shed new light on how we understand the presence of the cursed earth, the *terra damnata*, literally the damned earth, of *Blood Meridian* in the lesser tales told in the Border Trilogy. The violence of the Glanton Gang and Judge Holden's aspirations toward suzerainty are immanent and resonating in the lives and stories of John Grady and Billy. Likewise, the actions and lives of these two boys will forever be implicated and full in the oneness of history. In this chapter, I will blast

particular images from the Border Trilogy into the now-time to interrogate cultural mythology, explore the place of humans in history and in the world, and listen to the echoes of the probationary curse as it emanates from its literary origins in *Blood Meridian* into the lesser tales of the Border Trilogy. I begin my analysis with the telling of John Grady Cole's story in *All the Pretty Horses*.

Blood Meridian portrays scenes of violence unflinchingly and with an unbroken gaze. *All the Pretty Horses* flinches. It is a novel that grapples with and attempts to repudiate the border space's vast history of violent conflict, a coming of age story in which growing up forces the individual subject into a state of alienation from both land and community. The novel's protagonist, John Grady Cole, struggles to find his personal identity in a land that he idealizes and a land that simultaneously demolishes his false sense of nostalgia. John Grady battles against the dominant cultural ideology, but, because of that struggle, he is stuck between an increasingly industrialized Southwest and the unsavory, pre-industrialized history of that region. In the middle of John Grady's splintering sociocultural environment is an even more disruptive obstacle to his search for selfhood: his grossly naïve idealization of the land's past. His nostalgia is not historical, however. Rather, it stems from a narrative of cultural myth. The myth to which he subscribes depicts the US-Mexico border as a space where noble indigenous warriors roamed freely and without the pressures of modernity. Between John Grady's lamentations over modernity, his limited knowledge of history, and his subscription to cultural myth, there are great ecological ramifications. Under these conditions, John Grady's search for selfhood exposes a cultural predilection for bifurcating nature and culture.

However, we cannot reduce John Grady's plight to a simple binary. The novel's position is much more complex. Indeed, John Grady imagines the border as "a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war" (5). Here it is evident that John Grady is susceptible to certain cultural lore, especially narratives concerning the mythological and legendary characterization of Native Americans. But in his journey across the border into Mexico he regularly considers the "wildness about him, the wildness within" (60). John Grady's curiosity for wildness indicates an exposure to the wilderness myth, a keystone in US American cultural lore. Through the wilderness myth, the US American government historically justified Manifest Destiny and colonial expansion into the western territories. By conflating the myth of the noble native and the wilderness myth, the text bathes itself in a mythology of colonial origins. John Grady is seduced by a nostalgia misplaced not in history, but in falsely constructed cultural mythology, and he simultaneously resists industrial progress. He believes the myths surrounding the frontier, and he expresses a restlessness, a discontentedness with the advances of modernity. What he does not realize is that the myth of the noble native and the frontier myth both find their source in US American expansionist ideology. In essence, John Grady's journey is a search for wholeness in alienating cultural conditions. Moreover, his pursuit is marked by profound ecological questions. McCarthy regularly forces us to consider what role the land plays, how it informs cultural and national identity, and how it shapes history. That is, John Grady's internal conflict indicates the indelible relationship between nature and culture. He cannot extract human cultural constructions from the natural, material world, and that inextricable quality significantly contributes to his unrest. His internal tensions portray a microcosmic

rendering of the larger tensions of the Border Trilogy. Nature and culture appear as though they are locked in a fierce competition. However, I read McCarthy's border fiction through a bioregional framework to prove that nature and culture are not competitors, but mutual informants. Nature forms and constitutes culture, and culture influences the natural world, for good and for bad. In my reading of the Border Trilogy, I highlight the concomitances and tensions of nature and culture when they are bound together as mutual categories.

In this chapter, I explore the border space as a distinct bioregion in its more contemporary configurations. Whereas *Blood Meridian* offers a glimpse at the beginnings of the ecosocial effects of American settler colonialism, *All the Pretty Horses* and the other novels of the Border Trilogy provide images of more current day realities of the border region. Primarily, I look to John Grady's misplaced nostalgia concerning his idealized visions of the frontier, McCarthy's narrative of the fading wilderness, and the apparent absence of industrial overreach in Mexico as examples of Donna Haraway's conception of natureculture at work in McCarthy's western fiction. My purpose is to illuminate the complex interweaving of nature and culture in the border space in its more contemporary implications, such as the industrialization of the West, the intensification of border formation, and the commodification of land. *All the Pretty Horses* contains a great deal of environmental and social turmoil, and I aim to elucidate the reasons for such instability in the border space.

A greater understanding of the border as a distinct bioregion illuminates *All the Pretty Horses*' constant turbulence. Gloria Anzaldúa defines border spaces in the following manner:

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A

> borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition . . . in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.' (25)

As the primary region in question, the border that separates the United States and Mexico exhibits a destabilization of normative discourses, a blurring of boundaries between the expansionist, colonial "us" and the wild, uncontained "them." Moreover, the border challenges preconceived assumptions, which explains John Grady's discomfort. The land through which he travels subverts his particularly white American views on the border.

Furthermore, Anzaldúa's formation of the border space disrupts the same type of nostalgia that John Grady exhibits by calling it out for what it is: the exercising of dominant cultural and institutional power. Anzaldúa reasons, "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men" (38). However, it is important to remember that she does not split nature and culture, matter and spirit. She further writes, "In trying to become 'objective,' Western culture made 'objects' of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing 'touch' with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence" (59). That is, the United States government, the dominant cultural power in the border space historically and currently, dichotomizes form and matter in the Aristotelian sense, which then leads to a dyadic relationship between nature and culture. Anzaldúa is claiming that a separation of matter, corresponding to nature, and form is an expression of political and cultural power that makes objects out of people and things. Such an arbitrary and abstract division, one in which

border spaces closely follow suit, results in conflict and violence made evident by centuries of colonial conquest and abuse in the region.

Anzaldúa's vision of the border leads to a foundational principle of my analysis. To demarcate borders is to form a nature-culture binary. By creating borders, human governments give supremacy to culture. To them, it is more important to preserve artificial anthropocentric hegemony than to dwell in the land as it materially exists. Border formation fundamentally miscalculates natureculture by imposing dividing lines that do not have any real-world substance. Instead, borders are a result of colonial ideology that rejects natureculture. This rejection results in significant ecosocial conflict, which often turns violent. Instantiations of such violence include the Spanish conquest of Central America, the Mexican-American War, and more contemporary border disputes surrounding immigration and foreign policy. Each of these historical realities looms in the background of McCarthy's border fiction, continuously reminding the reader that history speaks to the conflicts that have occurred partly because of a nature-culture binary.

John Grady's dreamy false idealizations of an unenculturated past stand guilty of the violence that Anzaldúa describes. For instance, he imagines the noble native warriors "rattling past with their stone-age tools of war in default of all substance and singing softly in blood and longing south across the plains to Mexico" (6). To render the indigenous peoples that way in his imagination is to form an image of them that binarizes matter and form. In John Grady's mind, the supposed savages of the border purely conform to nature; they are devoid of culture. However, as Anzaldúa would argue, to think this way is to do violence and also to justify violence of the same sort.

To reiterate, McCarthy does not place John Grady in so simplistic a position to say that he is merely a product of violent enculturation. Certainly, John Grady is not without his problematic and insular worldviews at times, but his understanding of the world exhibits greater complexity than we might initially ascribe to him. In fact, he longs for a culture that admires and extols materiality, the body, and nature. John Grady's love for horses provides an example of that profound desire. McCarthy writes, "What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all his leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise" (6). More than anything, John Grady values the life and vivacity of living things. His love for the world and its creatures creates a tension with his subscription to the wilderness myth and the myth of the noble savage.

In that regard, John Grady's worldview is influenced Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Writing at the turn of the Twentieth Century, Turner argues, "Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, and its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (1). In a certain regard, Turner's claim is truthful. US American history is accurately characterized by colonial expansion westward. In almost every other sense, his thesis is problematic. His notion of national history erases the presence of indigenous civilizations in the Southwest. The so-called "frontier" was never a free land. Indigenous people occupied it for thousands of years before a white face was seen on the continent. Also, to misconceive of the land as in recession is a grave mistake for the same reason that the West was never a free land. Culture has existed in the West for most of documented human history. It just was not Anglo-

European culture that dominated the land until the past 500 years, which is miniscule in comparison to the millennia that other people groups occupied the land.

Alarmingly, Turner perceives the pre-colonial frontier as a primitive, overly simplistic space, a land that culture and technology has not yet defiled. He claims, "The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact they have been able to adapt themselves . . . to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life" (2). Turner constructs the Frontier as a wilderness in need of cultivation, an untamed land ruled by primitive, untamed people. This frontier thesis irresponsibly divides nature and culture and disregards the ways in which indigenous people already exercised sociopolitical power in that region. However, because the culture already at work in that region does not conform to Western standards, it is written off as primitive, and, therefore, the land must be won from the hands of the supposed savages. Such an understanding of the frontier, one that subscribes to the myth of the frontier, results in the violence exhibited both in history and in McCarthy's fiction.

Prefiguring subsequent critiques of the frontier myth, influential scholar Richard Slotkin's seminal text *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973) poses important challenges to Turner's frontier thesis. Slotkin writes, "The culture and literature we call American was born out of the confrontation between cultures that embodied two distinctly different phases of mythological evolution, two conflicting modes of perception, two antagonistic visions of the nature and destiny of man and the natural wilderness" (25). In that sense, Slotkin captures the confrontation that occurs in border spaces. Unlike Turner, Slotkin understands that in American history, "The

Europeans were met by native Indian cultures . . . whose vision of the American landscape was mythopoeic rather than conventional . . . whose values . . . were in important respects antagonistic to Europe" (25). To Slotkin, indigenous understandings of nature relied less upon the binaries of matter and form, politics and land, nature and culture. Slotkin's model here is guilty of romanticizing indigenous cultures, and it tends to lump diverse Native American cultures into a singular category. Moreover, it leans in the direction of Euro-normativity. However, his interrogation of Euro-American binaries still proves useful for breaking apart the abstraction of culture from nature. This peculiarly Anglo-European outlook unnecessarily divides the two categories, which results in cultural myth and violence. I contend that John Grady's characterization navigates a region somewhere between Turner and Slotkin, as exemplified by his ambivalent posture towards the border.

For example, to perform a character analysis of John Grady in which we view him as completely Turneresque is reductive. To characterize him as completely in line with Slotkin's theoretical frameworks is equally unproductive. His worldview is especially distinct from that of Anzaldúa. While John Grady does have some qualities rife with Turner's influence, he also recognizes the widespread ecological effects of US American colonial expansion. Describing the history of the Grady family ranch, McCarthy writes, "In eighteen eighty-three they ran the first barbed wire. By eighty-six the buffalo were gone" (7). The delineation of the land, a smaller scale example of border forming, results in the extermination of an animal species. John Grady draws a direct connection between practices of settler colonialism and ecological violence. Undoubtedly, John Grady mistakenly imagines the West as an untouched frontier where only noble savage warriors sauntered about devoid of culture. But he also laments the violent destruction of US American imperial expansion.

He is at once a product of enculturation and a young man who rejects the abstraction of matter and form.

A productive discourse on the ways in which false nostalgia and the abstract delineation between nature and culture operate requires an overview of the state of scholarship on *All the Pretty Horses*. Of particular note, the critical work that is of the most use to the current discussion falls under the border function and bioregional categories. To recapitulate, the term border function indicates a scholarly trend to look at the ways in which border spaces operate culturally and socio-politically. Likewise, bioregional criticism is a branch of ecocriticism that identifies the place or the specific region of a community, the border in our case, as a primary contributor to the multiform ways in which life takes place in said region. Pursuing such a framework to its logical conclusion reveals to us that place also plays a weighty role in the formation of culture. As such, the works of John Blair, Nicholas Monk, and David Gugin grapple the most directly with the dilemma of the border.

First, according to a significant body of major scholars, the border space fragments individual subjectivity. The journey into an alien land causes the self to become alien. When faced with the unknown, the subject no longer sustains a stable identity. Blair considers the ways in which the border influences the self or how a journey into an unknown land challenges conventional ways of knowing: "Mexico and the border lands become . . . *tierra*, a second homeland, no stranger in reality than the place-from-which-you-come, but by the same token no less strange and no less hostile" (301). Consequently, in a landscape abstracted from materiality, like the borderlands, everything isolates the individual from selfhood. In the objectification of the land, the individual loses a sense of personhood.

If the dominant power structure dictates the division of nature and culture, individual problems eventually become bigger issues within communities and nations. For example, Monk critiques the scholarly tendency to read the contact between the United States and Mexico in the border space as "a simple juxtaposition" (121). To configure the border that way "would be to underestimate the sophistication of McCarthy's insight and the nature of the relationship between the two countries" (Monk 121). The border is instead a site of complex national contact in which entire cultures conflict, clash, and dispute. Monk continues, "The conflicts that emerge in the journeys of McCarthy's characters, and in the broader encounter between his versions of Mexico and the United States, are seen in the context of geography, nationality, ethnicity, a permeable border, and pressing and differing historical necessities" (122). Though his work does not expressly interact with ecocritical, and, more explicitly, bioregional McCarthy criticism, Monk's analysis intersects with many of the priorities of environmental scholarship, especially criticism concerned with natureculture, because he takes into account the axes of history, geography, culture, politics, and the materiality of the natural world.

Monk's line of thinking leads smoothly to bioregional criticism. Defining this theoretical methodology, Gugin writes, "The bioregional approach is fundamentally an attempt at using the imagination to transform space into place. It argues that place should be considered a critical category, alongside race, class, and gender" (84). Contextually speaking, Gugin positions place as one of the primary concerns of *All the Pretty Horses*. John Grady's quest is to rediscover his sense of place in a world where the dominant power structures insist on destroying the place one calls home. Communicating the critical affordances of bioregionalism, Gugin further maintains, "Bioregionalism thus articulates the ongoing

process of renewal, resistance, and reimagination, which is exactly how John Grady Cole views his life on and relationship to his grandfather's west Texas ranch, his home in every sense of the word" (85). In Gugin's analysis, John Grady is a paragon of bioregional thought, an exemplar of a person who knows the true meaning of place and home. He exhibits all the major qualities of a bioregional thinker in that he regularly and mindfully considers the sustainability of his lifestyle and how he inhabits the land.

As for my own critical intervention, I depart from the major scholarship in several key ways. First, I diverge from Blair in that I argue that there is more at stake in McCarthy's novel than the isolation of the alienated subject in a foreign land. Second, I expand upon Monk's work to include natureculture as a primary operative component in *All the Pretty Horses*. Finally, while I agree with Gugin's emphasis on place, I disagree with his examination of John Grady. John Grady does not exemplify bioregional thought, though many of his concerns align with that way of thinking and understanding the world around us. I am not claiming that other scholars reduce John Grady to a singular paradigm. Rather, I suggest that John Grady's internal tension between his subscription to cultural myth and his resistance to environmental domination make a character study of him extremely difficult. Other scholars do not fail to recognize John Grady's complexity, but they do have a propensity to focus too heavily on individual facets of his complex characterization.

John Grady is neither the paragon of environmental thought, nor is he a pure proponent of Turneresque thought. There is reasonable explanation for John Grady's nebulous worldview. Primarily, he is young and inexperienced. As such, his understanding of the world is contradictory, and his sense of place changes as he gains more experience. From a more critical perspective, he exemplifies the transitoriness, contradictoriness, and

inexplicability of life on the border. John Grady exhibits neither the qualities of a staunch environmentalist nor that of a settler colonialist because of the conditions of the border as a distinct bioregion. That is how the border operates as a contested natureculture. I view John Grady's false nostalgia as the result of the colonial bifurcation of nature and culture, which thus explains his complexity of character. In a region of split identities, of course, John Grady does not personify an un-fragmented and unified subjectivity. His conditions forbid it. The cultural mythology at work in his psyche and the material realities of violence on the border keep John Grady from finding success on his journey to discover himself.

McCarthy further complicates the narrative by contrasting John Grady's unwhole identity with a fading wilderness narrative. We must remember that his imagined images of hordes of noble savage warriors are "lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives" (5). The world that once was, the world of pristine unenculturated environmental purity, is gone, never to appear in the memories of our contemporary world. Of course, the pure wilderness of John Grady's imagination never existed and is an illusion of the frontier myth.

Even in the inconsistencies of John Grady's understanding of natureculture, there are still gleams of truth in his understanding of the world. Human industrial and technological advances continuously encroach on natureculture, abusing the land to increase imperial control. It is an issue that John Grady looks out of his window and can see "the black crosses of the old telegraph poles yoked across the constellations passing east to west" (11). It is a problem that he witnesses industrial modernity pressing up against the very cosmos. Anthropocentric constructions of place lead to abuse of the environment, whether that is for economic or political gain, or for the continuous propagation of ideological hegemony over a

region. John Grady observes the disconnect between nature and culture, between space and place, and longs for a solution to the terrible conditions of life. In that sense, he is not wrong, but his solution—to return to a mythic ecological past that never existed—is unproductive and fails to recognize that nature and culture are entangled.

This inadequate solution, as it is a failing endeavor, uncovers John Grady's lethal misunderstanding of history. He neither fully grasps the horrific events of the past in his home region, nor does he understand his current moment's connection to the violent history of the border. In that regard, *All the Pretty Horses* differs in its treatment of the border space from *Blood Meridian* largely through its approach to Anglo hegemony in the region. Instead of the Mexican-American War for its historical backdrop—in which "U.S. troops invaded and occupied Mexico, forcing her to give up almost half her nation, what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California" (Anzaldúa 29)—the context is now the post-WWII economic boom of the mid-20th Century. The United States now expresses cultural hegemony over the region in a different manner, and that is largely through economic expansion, and an important environmental component attends that rapid fiscal growth. With the advent of industrialization in the West, the commodification of land used for ranching, and the United States' increase in global oil interests, the ways in which the United States utilizes the land often turns violent. The rapid capitalist consumption of resources is a violence that McCarthy recognizes as extremely detrimental to the ecosystems of the border region.

John Grady's conversations with his father at the beginning of the novel expose the ways in which US American economic expansion in the border region brings harm to the land. After John Grady complains about the sale of his grandfather's ranch, his father

reminds him, “Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven . . . If it was a payin proposition that’d be one thing. But it aint” (17). There is a clear economic component to the way in which land is treated on the border space. The abuses that occur in those spaces happen for a reason, and that reason is the expansion of the land holdings of corporate oil companies in the Southwest. John Grady’s father once again reminds us of the harsh realities of the current political climate. He says, “There’s still a lot of money in the ground out there . . . Number one I C Clark that come in last year was a big well” (12), in reference to major oil companies buying up old ranches. The father’s alarmingly stoic response to John Grady’s distress is characteristic of capitalist colonial expansion in the West. The land offers opportunities for economic growth. Therefore, whatever harm that expansion causes does not matter because there is still money to be gained in the oil fields. Understandably, this sort of advancement frightens John Grady. The ranch is no longer his home, his place as Gugin might say, because the dominant culture uses economics as an excuse to deny the coexistence of nature and culture. For this reason, John Grady sets out from the ranch in search of belonging in a material place.

John Grady’s departure from San Angelo, Texas, signifies that he no longer belongs in his homeland. Truly, his loss of his sense of place is indicative of the US American imperial presence on the border. It is appropriate that “after his grandfather’s death, John Grady Cole believes he has lost his life-place, or had it stolen from him, so he sets out to find another ranch, another home” (Gugin 93). Searching for meaning in this loss, John Grady travels to see his mother in a play, hoping to discover why she sold his place of belonging. McCarthy informs us, “He’d the notion that there would be something in the story [of the

play] itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing in it at all" (21). Neither family, nor culture, nor money can give John Grady a reason for the confusion and instability of his world. I contend that he cannot find meaning in the way the world operates because the history of settler colonialism and corporate expansion in his bioregion divides nature and culture in order to make and justify political and economic gains.

That search for meaning in a world that provides none drives the action of the novel. John Grady and his friend Rawlins are motivated to depart for Mexico, because they have a longing for cultural myth to be true and for US American imperialism to be untrue. Before their departure however, John Grady takes one last ride with his father. During this ride, McCarthy describes John Grady,

> The boy who rode on slightly before [the father] sat a horse not only as if he were begot by malice or mischance in some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been. (23)

It is evident that John Grady astutely perceives that there is something wrong with the world, with the ways in which the dominant power structures split natureculture, erecting false binaries in the name of colonial expansion.

Tragically, John Grady and Rawlins' journey across the US-Mexico border represents a determination to discover a sense of place in a world that disallows any such discovery.

The two boys find joy in the foreign land, but they also discover an equal amount of despair and pain in this new land that they thought they left behind. At the beginning of their adventure, McCarthy writes, “They rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect” (31). By the end, John Grady has grown up, his view of the world darkened by the violence he witnesses in Mexico. McCarthy ends the novel with a harrowing description of John Grady’s final departure from San Angelo, his hometown: “He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chittering among the dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come” (302). The world to come is still dark and obscure, unknowable because of the abstraction of culture from nature. Mexico, for John Grady, is both a refreshing experience in which the young man finds solace in nature and also one in which the violence he witnesses forever disillusions him. Border crossing is indeed an experience that is conflicting, beautiful, transitory, and violent, contradictory in every way. It challenges the mythology that John Grady subscribes to, and it brings him face to face with new forms of violence he never knew existed.

At first, *All the Pretty Horses* seems to uphold the romantic traditions of the frontier myth. Mexico appears to John Grady and Rawlins to be a land of solace, a sanctuary from the increasing industrialization on the Texas side of the border. To them, this is not a receding land touched by the foul hands of modernity, but an archaic place free from the grasp of enculturation. McCarthy exemplifies that sentiment with some of the boys’ trail

conversation. Rawlins observes, “There aint no electricity here . . . I doubt there’s ever even been a car in here” (51). To be able to ride freely, without the constraints of culture, is an enticing proposition for the boys, which is why their initial travels are full of humor and good-natured dialogue. But McCarthy does not let the illusion last. The novel rapidly descends into a cruel and devastating portrayal of the violent realities of the border space.

John Grady’s sexual encounter with Alejandra—the daughter of Don Héctor who owns Hacendado de la Purísima, a ranch in Mexico where John Grady and Rawlins end up working—illustrates his somewhat forced maturation. When John Grady refuses to break off his relationship with Alejandra, Don Héctor has Rawlins and John Grady turned into a Mexican prison. At the end of the chapter at the Hacendado, McCarthy writes, “He [John Grady] mounted up and they cuffed his wrists and handed him the reins and then all mounted up” (150). This moment where the two boys are taken into custody shatters the dreaminess of the earlier sections of the novel. The Mexican side of the border space is not a pristine land untouched by human artifice, but a region as equally enculturated as the American side. In this section, “McCarthy wants his reader to understand that John Grady is . . . in flight from a modern, technologically frenzied, eco-destructive United States . . . the romantic ‘unreality’ of Mexico, which . . . engenders from John Grady’s fantasy a darker, brutal, reality of its own” (Monk 122). Mexico proves not to be a romantic place of belonging for John Grady, but another land in which the dominant ideology divides nature and culture, just in different ways from the manners in which US American imperialism manifests its denial of natureculture.

In that regard, *All the Pretty Horses* is a bildungsroman in which the ensuing growing up is entirely unwanted, a novel in which the dreams of a teenage boy crumble under the

weight of oppressive realities. In McCarthy's Southwest, neither the United States nor Mexico subscribe to a bioregional model of nature and culture, and neither state tolerates the romantic, idealized imaginations of those seeking escape from the pressures of modern industrialization. John Grady does not find home; he only discovers further alienation from the world around him.

All the Pretty Horses lays a foundation for the remaining two novels in the Border Trilogy: *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. The following works expand on the themes present in John Grady's narrative and contribute to the complexity of McCarthy's Southwest as it is figured ecologically. With the first portion of John Grady's story completed, McCarthy makes way for the tale of Billy Parham, another teenage boy in search of meaning in a border space that is reluctant to concede any meaning. *The Crossing* is a novel in which the ecocritical insight gained by *All the Pretty Horses* is laid out in full. Questions of wilderness, ever-expanding technological advancement, and place again come to the forefront, which is why it is necessary for the novels of the Border Trilogy to be read together. Without the broader context of the whole series, an analysis of natureculture, as it pertains to McCarthy's border, would be incomplete.

However, as a standalone text, *All the Pretty Horses* provides several key insights into bioregional literary inquiry. It portrays what happens when cultures abstractly define nature and culture as mutually exclusive categories, it contemplates what place means in the border region, and it demonstrates what environmental alienation looks like. The novel proves fruitful for a discourse on region-specific naturecultures because it clearly demonstrates the complexities of how life happens on the border. John Grady's story draws attention to a crisis; it is a pressing and timely narrative that showcases the violent calamity

inflicted upon the land and its inhabitants, a distressing and urgent tale linking the violent bifurcation of nature and culture to false cultural mythology, the arbitrary designation of borders, and industrial capitalist overreach. The novel concludes with an anxiety over the world to come, a premonition of a darkness that does not signal a complete destruction of nature and culture, but instead articulates a profound uncertainty over how the history of the current world will unfold. John Grady, and by extension the reader, can only continue riding into the darkness with no knowledge of how the world will reveal itself, whether in the reunification of nature and culture or in the sinister, violent corruption of all life. In McCarthy's construction of the border space, hope for the future coexists with dread, beauty is intermingled with violence, and myth is entangled with history. The interlinking of such seemingly disparate and contradictory categories reflects John Grady's desire and the novel's attempts to reunite nature and culture, to bring together what never should have been torn apart, to reform a true natureculture.

It is arguable that the entire Border Trilogy consists of tales of boys on the verge of manhood struggling to know the world, vying for a sense of place in a confusing, complex, and contradictory border region. These boys are witnesses to the unending and reverberating violence of history, the perpetual echoes of the past in the eternal now. Out of the three novels, though, *The Crossing* most explicitly interacts with the difficulty of the individual and the community as they relate to ecology, natureculture, and history. This ponderous novel incessantly contemplates how we can know the world by employing the themes of tale and witness. In *All the Pretty Horses*, those themes manifest themselves implicitly in the tension between John Grady's subscription to cultural myth and his resistance to the violence those myths incur. *The Crossing*, on the other hand, explicitly meditates on the concepts of

the tale and the witness. The overt ruminations over what constitutes tale and witness also illuminate how the other novels of McCarthy's Border Trilogy operate in his broader body of fiction. Steven Frye posits, "Those who considered the whole of McCarthy's work in the context of *The Crossing* came to apprehend more fully the philosophical and religious subtexts present in his visual style" (*Understanding* 114). Through the novel's obscure, dense, difficult to access philosophical ruminations and archaic language, McCarthy's literary project gains some clarity, at least in terms of my own project. *The Crossing*'s obsessive pondering, ever-present inquiries into "hidden geometries and their orders" (130), formulates the world and its history as a unity, a singular tale and catastrophe in which the human attempts to dominate nature, delineate boundaries, and bifurcate nature and culture continuously resonate in the eternal now. I dedicate the bulk of my analysis on this volume of the Border Trilogy to these resonances, these lesser tellings of the world. First, I will analyze the preliminary details of *The Crossing*'s opening pages whose content largely consists of images of the world, visions of Billy Parham's that seem to indicate his place in the world's tale. Second and lastly, I will attend to the wolf sequence of the novel in which Billy Parham captures a she-wolf and travels with her over the border into Mexico.

The Crossing is rife with the struggle to know the world and to know one's place in it. On the very first page, in fact, knowing the world presents itself as the central focus. McCarthy writes,

> When they came south out of Grant County Boyd was not much more than a baby and the newly formed county they'd named Hidalgo was itself a little older than the child. In the country they'd quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother. The new country was rich and wild. You

> could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence. He carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english. (3)

This lengthy passage requires substantial unpacking as it contains great significance for tale, telling, witness, and their consequent implications for ecology and history. First, the newness of Hidalgo County is a resonance of *Blood Meridian*'s history, an image of the past laden with the effects of the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Second, the land, the border region is described as rich, wild, and without fences between there and Mexico. I draw attention to this detail because it indicates tropes of the spiritual quest and the wilderness narrative. Finally, we learn that Billy names, or rather, tells, his younger brother Boyd the different features of the world about them. He witnesses lesser tales so that he can bring to life the one tale, the single catastrophe of history, the Benjaminian notion that history is a singularity, not a progression.

Under US American polity, the newness of Hidalgo County calls into remembrance the violence by which that land was won. Once again, Benjamin's model of history provides an important point of comparison to McCarthy's fiction. As Benjamin puts it, the winning of this land is akin the winning of "cultural treasures," the plunder of the victors which the "historical materialist views . . . with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror . . .. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (391-92). Textualized in the form of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Southwest territories under US American sovereignty, Hidalgo County in this instance, are cultural treasures, documents of culture, and therefore sites of violence of horrific origins that are still present in now-time. We should

recall, remember, and arrest the horror, gore, and oppression smattering the landscapes of *Blood Meridian* when we consider the "newness" of Hidalgo County in *The Crossing*.

The second feature of the initial passage to which I draw attention is the wild emptiness of the landscape because it indicates certain qualities of the spiritual quest and the wilderness narrative, common tropes in US American literary history. By placing *The Crossing* in the same romantic tradition as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner, Frye identifies the central question of the novel as "the role of suffering in the material world and the fundamental nature of the divine" ("World In its Making" 46). Billy Parham, as a witness to the world's tale, must reckon with material violence and come to terms with the divine through his wilderness wandering, his spiritual quest. Moreover, "In the novels of this tradition, even when the world depicted is terrifying, violent, large, and seemingly indifferent, something essential and beyond knowing remains, manifesting itself in a universal story, articulated and embodied in the imagination, one that at its core involves human community and brotherhood" (Frye, "World In its Making" 62). In making this argument, Frye rejects the earliest body of McCarthy scholarship that viewed McCarthy's works as nihilistic, more in the tradition of Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme than the romantic tradition. While I agree that early McCarthy scholarship misrepresents the trajectory of his fiction, I argue that Frye overcorrects that mistake. Indeed, McCarthy's fiction—in spite of its violent horrors at times—never espouses nihilism or meaninglessness. Neither do his works affirm the positive presence of a beneficent divinity, which is not to say that the romantics necessarily embrace that view of the divine either. Like Melville in *Moby-Dick*, the existence of a beneficent God is only ever pondered, sought after but never found. This is not to say that this "something essential and beyond" is inscrutable and unknowable

in its existence. I contend the inaccessibility between the human telling of the world's tale and the existence of a beneficial God corresponds to the probationary curse of *Blood Meridian*. As *terra damnata*, McCarthy's literary world separates humans from any sense of camaderie, community, or brotherhood with the rest of the natural world. Because of our infidelity, our imposed division between nature and culture, we have incurred the curse of the inability to know our world. Our witness will always be false witness, or at least limited witness to the world's tale. In that regard, the wilderness narrative and the spiritual quest take on an extremely tragic tone.

The final detail of that lengthy passage from *The Crossing* that I will analyze is when Billy teaches his infant brother Boyd the names of the worldly things—trees, birds, animals, geographic features—they encounter in their family's journey to their new home in Hidalgo County. Billy already proves himself a witness to the world at such a young age. Dianne Luce, writing about this same passage from the novel, argues, "The novel suggests alternately that the events of his [Billy's] life flow in a continuous thread from the hands of a weaver god or that they come to him seemingly by chance . . .. But ironically Billy has attempted to plot his own course even as a child. The novel begins with his mapping the world for his baby brother and telling him stories about their future" (196). Over the course of the novel, it becomes clearer that Billy's attempts to carve his own path, to know the world fully, and to fight against the grain of history is a tragic irony, a hope for the future that the reader knows is impossible.

The preliminary details of the novel set a tone for the rest of the tale: this is a narrative of an impossible struggle to know the unknowable, to tell a tale for oneself autonomous from restrictions of this world's curse. Perhaps the wolf sequence best

exemplifies the futility of Billy's spiritual wilderness quest. Retroactively, the narrator calls these types of experiences "doomed enterprises" (129). Billy's attempts to decipher the world's tale, the single catastrophe of history as it appears in his excursion with the she-wolf across the border into Mexico will never yield the results which he desires. This earth's curse, that imprecated upon the land by human domination, epistemologically rends nature from culture, creating an abstract relationship between humanity and the world, and it also prohibits Billy from ever understanding the world's tale as it unfolds.

It is also necessary to direct attention to the location of Billy's lesser tale, which is the border. As Anzaldúa reasons, "A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (25). Borderlands resist endeavors like Billy's and subvert any undertaking of people aiming to know the world. Another vital detail of Anzaldúa's understanding of the border is its unnaturalness because that means the border is an imposition, an implement of human domination. Lesser tales that take place in the borderlands are vague and ambiguous and therefore more difficult to decipher and interpret. Billy's wilderness narrative will only result in more ambiguity because it takes place on the border.

Billy's journey across the border with the she-wolf, at its core, demonstrates the impossibility of finding his place in the world, of discovering filial camaraderie with the natural world. *The Crossing* employs the imagery of wolves as inscrutable and unknowable to give visual reference to that struggle to know the world. At a young age Billy witnesses several wolves as they hunt antelope: "They were running on the plain harrying the antelope and the antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry

powder blew about them in the cold moonlight . . . and the wolves twisted and turned and leaped in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire" (4). Human anthropocentrism, because of the inaccessibility to the ways in which non-human animals witness the world—which is itself likely an anthropocentric understanding of animal interiority—categorizes animal life as otherworldly, as spiritual and phantasmatic, flittering and ungraspable images of complete alterity. However, as Billy witnesses the wolves hunting the antelope, it is clear that his experience of this event is profoundly physical. As he watches the wolves, "He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air" (4). These animals physically live in the same world as Billy, and they physically leave imprints of their presence on the same earth on which Billy lives. It is not that the wolves and the antelopes occupy a literal otherworld, but simply that the world to which they give witness can never be the same world that humans do because the way they access the world is different. The struggle of Billy's lesser tale lies in his desire to access the world as wolves and antelopes see it.

The entrance of the she-wolf into the narrative only solidifies the ambiguity and impossibility of Billy's quest to know the world. Now at the age of sixteen, on the verge of adulthood, Billy tracks a she-wolf that has been attacking and killing the cattle at his family's ranch and at the surrounding ranches. It is clear that Billy's desire to track, capture, and take the wolf over the border into Mexico holds symbolic meaning for him. This quest is an opportunity to discover the "hidden geometries" (130) of the world and to understand his place in it. From the beginning of the novel, however, Billy is never afforded any success in this enterprise. His younger brother Boyd has reservations and doubts over the success of

Billy's project that manifest in a troublesome recurring dream. Boyd recounts his dream: "I had this dream . . .. There was this big fire out on a dry lake . . .. These people were burnin. The lake was on fire and they was burnin up" (35). What Boyd sees in his dream is a clear allusion to the biblical lake of fire, which serves as the location of judgment for those who fall under the curse of sin. This lake of fire is the price for the breaking of the covenant. Boyd's dream recalls the covenantal language of the altarstone that begins in *Blood Meridian* and reappears in much of the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre. Boyd's dream indicates that Billy's quest will only end in judgment for splitting apart nature and culture. Billy can never know the world and his place in it because the natureculture to which he belongs is dominated by people who have epistemologically distanced themselves from the natural world, rendering everything on the earth fundamentally other and unknowable.

I will highlight a conversation that Billy has with an elderly man who has had great experience with hunting wolves because it exhibits the costs of the curse in fuller detail. When Billy asks the man what he knows about wolves, the man responds, "El lobo es una cosa incognoscible . . . el lobo propio no se puede conocer. Lobo o lo que sabe el lobo. Tan como preguntar lo que saben las piedras. Los arboles. El mundo" [The wolf is an unknowable thing . . . the wolf itself cannot be known. The wolf or what the wolf knows. Like asking what the stones know. The trees. The world.] (45). To know the world by knowing the wolf is impossible because the wolf is unknowable to human understanding. There is a considerable degree of separation from humanity and the world, and therefore humans cannot know themselves by knowing the world in its otherness, its alterity.

The narrator of Billy's story forbids a comprehensive knowledge of the world. Billy's discussion with this elderly man only makes this fact more and more clear as he continues to

speak. Through this dialogue that slips in and out of Spanish and English, Billy understands this man to say, "Between their [the wolves'] acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them" (46). Wolves and, by extension, the rest of the natural world have a communion with nature that is foreign, even alien to humanity's understanding of the world because of its inveterate, indwelling anthropocentrism. Like the man says, we see only our actions and the names we have given to things—the tales we have told—but the world as it is, as the wolves see it, is invisible to us, inaccessible in its fullness. Because, in McCarthy's fictive world, humankind continuously attempts to break the bond between nature and culture, we can no longer know it. Natureculture is now divided, and we are complicit in its division. In McCarthy's constructions, humans have always already cut a profane covenant with violence. As the world heads toward cataclysm, we only abide by that covenant more violently.

Because of their penchant for violence, particular humans have epistemologically separated themselves from the world. Succinctly, the old man summarizes his claims about the wolf and the world to Billy, "The wolf is made the way the world is made. You cannot touch the world" (46). This man does not say that humans are immaterial and greater than nature. On the contrary, the wisdom that he imparts to Billy is a call for remembrance, to consider why humans are no longer made up of the same stuff with which the world is made, why the world will always be fundamentally other. In our hubristic anthropocentrism, we continuously break off our communion with nature, the bond that produces filial harmony

with the world. Something separates humankind from the world. I argue that the predilection for bifurcating nature and culture, a tendency that has plagued certain members of the human species both now and in past civilizations, is the cause of separation in McCarthy's fiction.

Admittedly, the old man exhibits human exceptionalist thought. There are several problems with the words he speaks to Billy. First, he assumes that humans can exist apart from the world, which is impossible. Second, by positing that all humans are distinct from the world, he homogenizes the human species into a singular humanity. But humanity is always plural. Finally, because of the first two errors, the old man conceives of natureculture as singular. However, if humanity must be understood as plural, then so must natureculture. There is not one singular natureculture, but many naturecultures. In that sense, the old man's conception of the world is still just as guilty of anthropocentrism as the human hubris that he critiques. However, his argument still bears weight in a discourse on particular bioregions and particular naturecultures. The natureculture in mind is the US-Mexico border region. Billy belongs to a natureculture that espouses human exceptionalism, at least on the US side of the border. Therefore, he lives epistemologically, not ontologically separate from the world. Like John Grady, the frontier myth and the narratives of US American expansionist rhetoric pervade his thoughts, rendering it impossible for him to know the world in terms of natureculture without a significant paradigmatic shift.

What has gone unnoticed in the scholarship is that Billy and the old man's conversation foreshadows the consequences of the wolf's inevitable death. Upon crossing the border, Billy runs into trouble when he crosses paths with a Mexican sheriff who confiscates the wolf and then lends her to a carnival in a small village. The carnival masters place the wolf in a pit and force her to fight their hound dogs. Disgusted by the abuse and mistreatment

of the wolf, Billy enters the fighting ring and fires a bullet into the wolf's head, ending her misery. He then trades the wolf's corpse for his rifle and rides off with the body and buries her in the wilderness. Before laying the dirt across her grave, Billy

> took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war . . .. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it. (127)

Before her death, the wolf contains in herself that which cannot be touched, which according to the old man with whom Billy speaks at the beginning of the novel says is the world. In the death of the wolf, the humanity belonging to the border region extinguishes the world in a violent act that is at once its sin and its judgment. By cutting themselves off from communion with nature, the humans of the border call judgment upon their heads and only incur even more violence.

Once again, the altarstone reappears in McCarthy's fiction. This time, however, humans are not sacrificing themselves in violence, but they are sacrificing that which is made up of the same stuff as the world, that which contains the world in itself. The death of the wolf indicates an irreversible action that will resonate forever in the eternal now. It is not something that can be taken back and it will hold perpetual historical consequences. The wolf's sacrifice is not an assertion of human dominance in the world, but only an estrangement from a world that will be lost to forever if the epistemic separation of nature and culture continues.

The devastation that Billy witnesses in *The Crossing* reaches a critical point in *Cities of the Plain*. In 1999, a year after the novel's publication, the influential McCarthy critic Edwin Arnold made some predictions about the public and critical reception the novel would receive. Arnold writes, "Some will view *Cities of the Plain* as a lesser work, and certainly it is more constricted than either of the first two volumes whose protagonists are initially large of heart as they move from one place to another . . .. This is a diminished world McCarthy creates in *Cities of the Plain*, a post-war West suffering through its mockeries and subtractions" (222). To some extent, Arnold is correct about how many critics have treated the novel in the twenty years since its publication. *Cities of the Plain* has received significantly less critical attention than the other two volumes of the Border Trilogy and most of the rest of McCarthy's other works. But, as Arnold observes, this novel "is also a necessary work, the one towards which the first two have journeyed in all their richness, and it is not without its moments of quiet splendor. It may, in fact, prove ultimately to be the wisest of the books and, in its cumulative effect, the one that in retrospect will move us the most deeply" (222). The now diminished world, the West stripped of its fullness, is a sobering reminder of the conditions of the curse, the consequences of human anthropocentrism.

In retrospect, *Cities of the Plain* has not historically moved readers and critics in the way that Arnold foresaw, but his observations about the importance of the work still ring true. This novel is completely necessary to the Border Trilogy, and its resonances with the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre are astounding. In particular, *Cities of the Plain* most overtly deploys the imagery of the altarstone and explores the literary significance of that image.

Though the entire novel is worth exploration, I dedicate my critical attention to the epilogue because it most directly continues the theme of the altarstone and the sacrifice of the witness.

The final novel's epilogue measures the "hidden geometries" (*The Crossing* 130) that trouble the narratives or the lesser tales of the world's one tale in the rest of the Border Trilogy. After John Grady Cole's death in the city of Juarez, Billy leaves the ranch where the two men originally meet each other. Here the novel skips several decades to "the spring of the second year of the new millennium" (270). In the year 2002, Billy enters the modern world, the diminished world whose tale and history is one singular catastrophe perpetually headed toward ruin. At this moment in time, Billy is a homeless septuagenarian traveler. On the side of a highway, the aged wanderer Billy Parham listens to the story of another man he meets on the side of the highway who tells him the details of a troublesome dream. About a traveler in his dream who comes to a table of rock in a high, rocky mountain pass, the stranger narrates, "And on the face of that rock there were yet to be seen the stains of blood from those who'd been slaughtered upon it to appease the gods" (270). This flat rock is the great altarstone, the site of the bloody sacrifice that epistemologically separates nature and culture. Human sacrifice breaks the bond between nature and culture and establishes a different covenant with violence, with the power that cuts nature off from culture in the anthropocentric model of the universe.

This scene between Billy and the stranger, reminiscent of Billy's encounter with the ex-priest in *The Crossing*, brings the concepts of tale, witness, and the altarstone into a complex philosophical dialogue about the characteristics of the world, history, and the ability to know the world and its tale. Arnold claims, "The essence of the traveler's story is that we create in retrospect the narrative of our lives; we give shape to the events that have occurred,

whether they have inherent connection at all" (241). While I agree with Arnold's assessment of the stranger's dream, I expand upon his analysis to incorporate more detail about the nature of the tale, the witness, history, the world, and the complex network that comprises all of those categories.

I turn to McCarthy himself to decipher the bizarre and horrific dream that the stranger narrates to the aged Billy. In 2017, McCarthy published an essay in *Nautilus*, the popular science magazine, titled "The Kekulé Problem," in which he explores the tension between the formation of complex language via the unconscious and its origins in the animal human brain of our evolutionary past. Pondering the role of language in the human unconscious, McCarthy writes, "The evolution of language would begin with the name of things . . .. The rule is that languages have followed their own requirements. The rule is that they are charged with describing the world. There is nothing else to describe" ("The Kekulé Problem"). This is the tension of the stranger's dream. Delving back into the evolutionary past of the human unconscious, McCarthy, and the stranger, as well, grapple with the difficulty of the human unconscious describing the world, telling a lesser tale of the world to employ the parlance of the ex-priest in *The Crossing*.

Terrifying and ambiguous, the stranger's account of his dream brings to mind Benjamin's angel of history. Describing the dream traveler's movements and actions, the stranger tells Billy, "His eyes fell upon this bloodstained altarstone which the weathers of the sierra and the sierra's storms had been impotent to cleanse" (270). Arguably, this dream altarstone is the site of Benjamin's singular catastrophe of history, and the stormy weather operates akin to the storm of progress. To reiterate, Benjamin conceives of the angel of history as driven back by a great storm that "is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in

his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm" (392). Progress batters the angel of history and drives it further away from the perpetually piling debris that is the single great catastrophe. In the stranger's dream, the bloodstained altarstone is the location of the great catastrophe and the lives sacrificed upon it are the debris, the wreckage of history.

Apocalyptic in its vision, the stranger's dream and his account of the dream traveler thematically wraps up the project of the Border Trilogy, which is, in part, to explain the world's devastation with the breaking apart of the binding relationship between human culture and nature, the cutting of a profane covenant that favors human domination over naturecultures. This profane and sacrilegious ritual of human, and, in the case of *The Crossing*, wolf sacrifice further drives humans away from knowing their place in the world and from purifying themselves of their anthropocentricity. The storm of progress, in Benjamin's formulation of history, is irreversible and the debris of sacrifice upon the great bloodstained altarstone will echo forever in the eternal now.

The stranger's dream leads him first to consider how we can understand his dream traveler's lesser tale. This endeavor becomes even more complicated when the traveler begins to dream within the stranger's dream. Pondering the possibility of such a perplexing dream, the stranger asks, "Let us say that the events which took place were a dream of this man whose own reality remains conjectural. How assess the world of that conjectural mind? And what with him is sleep and what with him is waking? How comes he to own a world of night at all" (272). These questions are the research questions that drive McCarthy's subsequent study into the power of language and the unconscious: "Has it [the unconscious]

direct access to the outer world? . . . How might we make inquiries of it? Are you sure?" ("The Kekulé Problem"). In *Cities of the Plain*, the unconscious appears to connect all of humankind to a collective history filled by now-time, an unconscious remembering of the singular catastrophe.

McCarthy's literary experimentation with the human unconscious and history, the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, adopts a Benjaminian view of history. By that claim, I mean that the past continues to resonate in the world during the now-time. Considering the fullness of life belonging to the dream traveler, the stranger informs Billy, "The world of our fathers resides within us. Ten thousand generations and more. A form without a history has no power to perpetuate itself. What has no past can have no future. At the core of our life is the history of which it is composed and in that core are no idioms but only the act of knowing and it is this we share in dreams and out" (281). According to this model of history, the past is always present in the now-time. History, in its singularity, is the world's tale of which all lesser tales consist of and speak to, the record of singular, perpetual devastation that marks the human story that calls for remembrance.

This remembrance is not a nostalgia, as John Grady Cole feels in *All the Pretty Horses*, a desire to return to a false mythological past of the US American Southwest. This call for remembrance is not a call to believe the myths that falsely give name to the world, but to confront the great singular catastrophe. Trenton Hickman, writing about the final pages of *Cities of the Plain*, argues that in the epilogue McCarthy "defeats a sense of nostalgia and sentimentalism that would tempt readers to see a novel like *Cities of the Plain* as an elegiac treatment of the 'vanishing' West" (143). Instead, "McCarthy suggests that the ways of his protagonists John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, like the ways of generations before them,

are not ‘disappeared’ but merely ‘hidden’ from view, only to resurface and reinterpret the later western landscape in generations to come” (Hickman 143). History, in the Border Trilogy, will ultimately resurface as “a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (Benjamin 391). To confront the great singular catastrophe, the world’s one tale, we must arrest the past in our current moment of danger and remember the violence and barbarism that defines much of human history.

Enigmatic and perplexing, the stranger’s dream calls to mind the constant and ever-present danger that the singularity of history presents to us. The stranger, at the end of his narration, asserts, “The log of the world is composed of its entries, but it cannot be divided back into them. And at some point this log must outdistance any possible description of it” (286). Eventually, the catalogue of history will have expanded so greatly that it will be beyond human reckoning. Essentially, when history can no longer be recorded, catastrophe will strike.

The trajectory of the novels of the Border Trilogy, as echoes of the historical violence of *Blood Meridian*, is Benjamin’s ultimate moment of danger, and the stranger’s dream perfectly encapsulates that sense of emergency. Describing what he believes the dream traveler sees in his own dream, the stranger posits, “The world to come must be composed of what is past. No other material is at hand. And yet I think he saw the world unraveling at his feet. The procedure which he adopted for his journey now seemed like an echo from the death of things. I think he saw a terrible darkness looming” (286). The dream traveler is witness to the great singular catastrophe, the entropic heat death of the universe, the world in its burning. If we do not remember the past in the moment of danger, the world will be like Boyd’s dream in *The Crossing*: a lake of burning fire in which people are also burning. In

terms of my own project, if humans adhere to anthropocentrism, great ecological disasters that we have no power to stop will become the terrible darkness looming in the sight of the dream traveler. The world will burn and unravel if we continue to sever nature and culture epistemologically. We must remember the past as full of now-time.

McCarthy's oeuvre points to catastrophe. The violence that humans enact on the world can only end in disaster. The enforcement of borders and the violence that occurs in those border spaces can only culminate in an unreckonable cataclysm. McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road* (2006), imagines that disaster, which is why I have chosen to conclude my project with it. In a world in which borders, states, and governments have burned away, McCarthy envisions judgment, a penalty for humanity's continuous and unending profaning of the natural world like we witness in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy. The undoing of the world befalls us because of our own wicked abuse of the earth.

Coda

The World in Its Burning

There is an image nearing the end of *The Road* (2006) that troubles the human insistence on measuring the immeasurable with arbitrary instruments of our own making, that halts the anthropocentric drive to stitch arbitrary borders into the fabric of the earth. It is also an image that recalls the implement in the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* (1985), the tool by which humans substantiate and enforce their dominating will in the world. The novel's narrative follows an unnamed man and boy—referred to as such in the actual diegesis, but also as the father and the son in major McCarthy scholarship—as they make their way through the desolate, burned, apocalyptic wasteland that once was the US American Southeast toward their end goal, the imagined location of hope and potential refuge from the horrors of the world after it has burned with the flame of catastrophe: the southern coast. But their destination offers no escape. It is as scarred, barren, and hopeless as the starting point of the man and the boy's journey. Two things are particularly clear. The whole world is this way, and there is no sanctuary among the wreckage. When they reach the coast, the man and the boy discover a half-sunk sailboat on the shoreline. The father, leaving his son on the beach, boards the boat in search of any supplies or food that he and his son might use for their survival. During his search, the man unearths a brass sextant, a device that measures the angle between an astronomical object and the horizon, a tool that quantifies the world, gives it structure, geometry. This discovery of the sextant is the image to which I refer, because "It was the first thing he'd seen in a long time that stirred him" (228). A remnant of the pre-apocalyptic world, the sextant becomes beautiful to the man, because it speaks to the way the world was: ordered, mathematical, and bound by discrete units of anthropomorphic

measurement. I draw attention to this image precisely because of the sextant's uselessness in the world of *The Road*, a novel that imagines a borderless world, a world in which the judgment of the curse incurred by human hands is fully realized. Punishment for the human desire to dominate the world, an aspiration which McCarthy explores in detail in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, arrives in destruction, in the unveiling of the world in its burning.

Here, I must make some justification for my invocation of *The Road*, a novel taking place along the East Coast, in a work of scholarship heavily focused on the complex historical, sociopolitical, and ecological literary manifestations of the United States-Mexico border region. I call several pieces of evidence to my aid. First, I argue that a reading McCarthy's novels as an oeuvre contains just as much critical validity as reading them as discrete, individual works worthy of scholarly attention in their own right. Capping off the larger body of works, *The Road* and its narrative can be read as the culmination of the historical and environmental patterns that arise in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, regardless of geographical location. Second, *The Road* carries over the theme of borders in that its postapocalyptic landscapes indicate a world in which borders are piled in the wreckage of the past along with the rest of the constructions originating in human artifice. Finally, *The Road* resonates with McCarthy's western novels through its depiction of the curse in its fullness, its real material manifestation. It is the consequence of humanity's execrable deeds, which was only threatened in *Blood Meridian* and the Border trilogy.

My analysis of this novel is predicated on the confluence of borderlessness and the curse. The removal of borders from the world occurs through their absolute, utter destruction. Borders crumble under the judgment incurred by human environmental abuse. In that regard,

the question of borders remains very much alive in McCarthy's fiction, mostly because we witness the dire consequences of the implementation of borders and the establishment of human domination over the world. The message of *The Road* is bitterly simple: these visions of ashen, scarred, and uninhabitable landscapes are our end, our eschaton, the constantly looming and threatening darkness that will bring about the death of the world if we persist in our anthropocentric ways of living. There can only be catastrophe and trauma in this age of global consumption and environmental violence.

Embedded in the biblical discourse of the apocalypse, *The Road* draws on mystic theology, particularly that of the Seventeenth Century German theologian Jacob Boehme. For example, at the end of the novel, the man wakes up in the middle of the night, looks out at the road, and perceives "the salitter drying from the earth" (261). The word salitter comes from Boehme's theology, and it designates the essence of God.[3] In other words, God has abandoned the world. McCarthy's invocation of this obscure theologian connotes that the curse has been fulfilled.

In this moment of the novel, the theme of the altarstone resurfaces in its final permutation. As the man continues walking along the road, he discovers "at a crossroads a ground set with dolmen stones where the spoken bones of oracles lay moldering. No sound but the wind" (261). I interpret the dolmen stones, on top of which rest the bones of oracles, as an altarstone, a site of human sacerdotal devotion to violence. Importantly, the man hears nothing but the wind. The bones do not speak. They convey no message from the divine. They only communicate to the man that God's essence has departed from the world. The

[3] See Boehme's unfinished work *The Aurora* (1612) for a more complete explanation of the term salitter. Also, see *Blood Meridian*'s epigraph, which includes a quote from Boehme, for an understanding of how Boehme's theology permeates McCarthy's oeuvre.

effects of the curse cannot be reversed. Concerning these bones, the man ponders: "What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack? At some reckonable and entabled moment?" (261). There is no way for the man to determine the significance of this oracle because the way the world once was, according to McCarthy's philosophical construction of the world, is now inaccessible because of the curse and its effects. Catastrophe has struck the earth, and there is no hope of global regeneration.

The exact nature of the cataclysmic event that sets the world on fire in *The Road* remains shrouded, but what is clear is that there is no return to the way the world once was and no regeneration of ecosystems. Regarding the catastrophe that completely devastates the earth, McCarthy only tells us, "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (52). That is the only description in the entire novel of the event that burns away the world. The long shear of light could describe the explosion of nuclear weaponry, a natural disaster of unreckonable magnitude, or the revelatory judgment of God. Exactly what this disaster is will always be unclear. Scholars have considered this catastrophe from every angle, and none have come to a consensus. However, all agree that the effects are irreversible. The world will never recover.

Recent ecocritical scholarship points to the ubiquitous presence of cannibalism in *The Road* as an indicator of the catastrophe's cause and even as a continuation of the behavior that drives the world to its death in the first place. Jordan Dominy places *The Road* into conversation with Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century cannibalism narratives and reads the novel's images of "cannibalism as a critique of unchecked consumption of environmental resources and the products made with them" (147). The destruction of the world, stemming

from capitalistic consumption, and its continuing decay are symbolized in the anthropophagic horror littering the novel's narrative. The text certainly justifies Dominy's reading. During their journey, the father and the son frequently run into horrific scenes of cannibalism. As they search a seemingly abandoned home for supplies, the man discovers a locked cellar door. The man stumbles into a cellar-turned-human-meat-locker: "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt" (110). Later, the boy is the witness to cannibalistic terror. While he and his father search a recently vacated camp, he sees "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (198). To Dominy and likeminded scholars, *The Road*'s invocation of anthropophagy blames the consumptive culture of global colonial capitalism for the destruction of the world and the continuing violence after its death. Ritualistic and brutal, the novel's ever-present cannibalism communicates to us, "The postapocalyptic world of *The Road* can be read as a realization of the religion of consumer capitalism" (Dominy 149). Consumer society heralds the world's doom. It is the cannibalistic harbinger of catastrophe.

Whereas Dominy's reading of *The Road* is not expressly a critique of environmental abuse—it is, rather, one of capitalist consumption—David Huebert draws a connection between cannibalism and the environment through what he calls ecological cannibalism. The catastrophe that annihilates the world and its inhabitants occurs because of the mass unbridled consumption of resources. Huebert claims that "humans are ecological cannibals insofar as they excessively devour their own planetary body" (67). In other words, the earth becomes a wasteland of ash and trash, decay and detritus, because humans have historically

profaned naturecultures by plunging into their depths, scrounging unchecked for resources. As a result, the earth no longer sustains life.

According to Huebert, McCarthy engages in protomourning, mourning environmental devastation before it happens, a kind of plangent prefiguration of the world to come if we continue on our catastrophic course. However, "What this rubric of mourning does, though, when coupled with the futurity inherent in environmentalist discourse, is recalibrate the familiar (past-oriented) trajectory of mourning and melancholy, asking how we might begin to mourn for ecosystems not yet lost but in peril, and how such anticipatory mourning might guide us toward proleptic activism" (Huebert 77). To Huebert, the intersection of anthropophagy and proleptic mourning in *The Road* should drive us to activism. The fear that the images of the world in its utter consumption invoke presents humanity with an ethical imperative.

The obvious biblical-apocalyptic resonances of *The Road* shine a spotlight on the theme of ethics and on the constant looming sense of impending judgment that brands the novel. The parallels between the Book of Revelation and *The Road* are too numerous to list them in their entirety. For that reason, I focus only on those that have an overt environmental impact.[4] John the Apostle records, "And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of an hour . . .. And the angel took the censer, and filled it with the fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake" (*KJV*, Rev. 8:1 and 5). Perhaps the most explored moment from the Book of Revelation in popular culture, the opening of the seventh seal has come to

[4] See Revelation 6,8,9 and 16 for complete descriptions of the narratives of the Seven Seals, the Seven Trumpets, and the Seven Bowls.

signify the unveiling of an ultimate cataclysm at the end of history. The catastrophe, whatever it is, is so terrifying that the entire host of heaven solemnly stays silent for an hour before thunder, lightning, and an earthquake wreak absolute devastation upon the earth. Clearly, the "shear of light" and "series of low concussions" that bring about the world of *The Road* echo the cataclysm that renders heaven silent in the Christian understanding of the apocalypse.

McCarthy plainly coopts the eschatological narratives of the Bible to express that the destruction of the earth is a kind of judgment, a deserved reckoning for human sins. The biblical narrative most clearly reverberates in *The Road* through the pouring of the seven bowls. In John's vision of the apocalypse we see that "the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of water; and they became blood" (*KJV*, Rev. 16:3-4). Likewise, when the man and the boy arrive at the beach in *The Road*, they witness "a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as the eye could see like an isocline of death. One vast sepulcher" (222). The similarities between the death of all the living creatures in the biblical narrative and macabre scene in McCarthy's novel exist to draw a connection between the theme of judgment and curse and that of ecological calamity. Because of the consumptive and anthropocentric cultural practices of humanity, like those that Dominy and Huebert interrogate, humanity is cursed for its actions, doomed to witness the destruction of the world rendered uninhabitable.

An exploration of judgment and the curse in *The Road* leads to another vital question: is there any redemption? This is certainly a question that McCarthy asks. At the center of the

novel lies the question of how the world can be saved, how God might intervene, how the boy might bring new life to the world. As might be expected, the novel never gives a clear answer. Ely, one of the few human beings that the boy and the man happen upon in their travels, famously and paradoxically declares, "There is no God and we are his prophets" (170). If we are to take Ely's pronouncement as the text's definitive stance on the issue of redemption and regeneration, then we might conclude that hope is not worthwhile. The world cannot be reborn. However, McCarthy juxtaposes the nihilistic hopelessness of Ely with the messianic, Christ-like figure of the boy. Again, it is not clear if the boy actually can bring new life to the world or if that power is artificially attached to him by the father. Early in the novel, McCarthy narrates, "He [the man] knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). He attributes to the boy the same status that John the Apostle elsewhere applies to Christ. The boy becomes to him the very word of God. Popularly believed to be referring to Christ, the Book of John begins: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (*KJV*, John 1:1). By invoking the figure of Christ, the father places the world's hope for redemption on the boy. But this weight that the man places on his son, the weight of saving the world, often leads the father to a violence that is symptomatic of the scabrous world they are living in. Justifying his killing of a man who threatened the boy, the father says to his son, "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (77). McCarthy does not afford his readers the comfort that the world will be redeemed.

The death of the father at the end of the novel only further confuses the matter. Symbolically, after his father dies, the boy "stayed three days and then he walked out to the road" (281). After the three-day period, the novel implies that there is a resurrection. The boy

will bring hope to the already dead and continuously dying world. But the solution is not that simple. As he departs from his dead father, another man approaches him and offers to take care of the boy with his own family. When the boy asks him, "How do I know you're one of the good guys?", the man responds, "You dont. You'll have to take a shot" (283). If the boy is the redemptive figure, then his outcome should be assured. But that is not the case. His future is uncertain, and that means that his supposed regenerative power is not an absolute reality. Perhaps the divinity ascribed to him signifies an unstable attachment to the old world before everything burns on the end of the father. After all, such religious imagery does not belong in this new world, the earth shorn of all its recorded history.

A more solid understanding of the possibility of redeeming the world requires a greater understanding of the state of the world in *The Road*. Early in the novel, McCarthy describes the world as "barren, silent, godless" (4). If it is godless, then redemption cannot come from the hand of God. Later, the boy and the man look at an old map to determine their route to the coast. The man points at the map and says that they are state roads. The subsequent conversation between the man and the boy illuminates that the world now exists in statelessness:

> Why are they the state roads?
>
> Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called states.
>
> But there's not any more states?
>
> No.
>
> What happened to them?
>
> I dont know exactly. That's a good question. (43)

The great cataclysm that burns away the world in *The Road* also burns away borders, governments, and sociocultural institutions. All that remains is the road, the skeletal vestige of a world permanently gone. Reinstating those borders, governments, and institutions will never bring new life to the world. Nor can history provide a solution. It is vital to remember that "the clocks stopped at 1:17" (52) when the world ends in the novel. History as a measurement and record of discrete, progressive time stops when disaster hits.

The former ways of knowing the world burn away in the fire, and, therefore, redemption, as understood through the paradigm of the pre-burned world, is impossible. For redemption to remain a possibility, the term has to be reworked. That task is extremely challenging because McCarthy even strips the world of its relationship to language. This new world is

> the world shrinking down about a raw core of possible identities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he [the man] would have thought. How much was gone already. The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality" (89).

That sacred idiom is language. The word is cut off from its object-referent. Language itself fails to bring meaning to the world.

If borders, states, governments, cultures, history, and language cannot bring redemption to the world, then the very idea of redemption must undergo conceptual remodeling. None of the previous categories for figuring redemption exist in the world, so we must construct a new rendering of the term. Shelly Rambo recognizes the absolute lack of referents in the world of *The Road* and demands that scholars reframe their question. She

writes, “I claim that this haunted, post-world territory cannot simply be interpreted within a redemptive framework. By this I mean that the question of a redemptive ending is not the question that McCarthy presents to us in *The Road*. Instead he confronts us with the question of the aftermath: what does it mean to witness the remains?” (101). To Rambo, language of redemption indicates a hope for the future that the novel does not provide. Her reading “offers a call to witness suffering and death rather than the assurance of victory over suffering and death” (113). In this understanding of the novel, *The Road* is not a nihilistic, hopeless portrait of a meaningless world, but a recognition and affirmation of trauma. The solution is simply to witness the remains, not to force a redemptive framework on a novel that resists that kind of reading.

Hannah Stark also navigates the ways in which *The Road* bids the reader to witness the destruction of the natural world, and she likewise interrogates the redemption narrative. However, she does so on different grounds than Rambo. Stark claims that the redemption trope, which she sees as fundamental to *The Road*, is anthropocentric. Furthermore, she argues, “The anthropocentrism of *The Road* privileges the perspective of a certain type of human who is male, apparently white, evokes Christian mythology, and was once middle class” (81). In that regard, Stark resists the novel’s reception as a monolithic work in environmental fiction. She sees the novel as guilty of privileging the human in ecocritical apocalyptic discourse, especially in its treatment of the white male as the savior figure in the redemption narrative.

My intervention in the environmental quandary that McCarthy proposes puts Walter Benjamin and the final paragraph of *The Road* into conversation to untangle the vast knot that McCarthy ties in his novel. To reiterate, with no borders, no states, no governments, no

history, and with a failure of language, the possibilities for redeeming the world are severely limited. I propose that we must rethink the model of redemption to include the "*weak* messianic power" (Benjamin 390) of the historical materialist, remembrance or memorial, and witness. The term weak messianic power does not connote an absolute power to save the world. In fact, Benjamin purposefully italicizes the word "weak" to emphasize its importance in his understanding of history. The emphasis on the word "weak" requires that we rethink redemption. The old understanding of redemption—as a divine intervention ushering in an age of regeneration and new life—is forbidden in *The Road*. However, the term redemption is not strictly limited to the ways in which Rambo and Stark understand it.

To come to a fuller understanding of the ways in which we can rethink redemption, Benjamin once again calls for some attention. Benjamin proposes an axiom central to his model of history: "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of the past" (390). History is never lost. Rather, it is forgotten. I contend that the dire condition of the world that the father perceives in *The Road*—that the clocks stopped at 1:17, that history ceased when tools for measuring time failed to work—is just that: the man's perception, not the world as it really is, not an understanding of the past in its fullness. The past is not lost, the man has simply forgotten it. History has not ceased. Only the means by which the world used to record history have stopped being used. The method of recording of history in written, narrativized texts can no longer be a viable way of knowing the world.

Benjamin also argues that we should not understand history in terms of progress or the future as an emptiness to be conquered and made material. To think of the past and the future that way is to give credence to the violence of the oppressors. Rather, Benjamin points

to the Israelites of the Old Testament for how we should study history: "We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanted the future" (397). To clarify, Benjamin posits, "This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogenous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter" (397). Remembering the past does not imply forgetting the future, but strips the future of its magic and mystery, making it something not to be conquered or dominated. Instead, we must look to the past so as to deny such an understanding of the future.

The futurity of *The Road*'s environmental discourse appears to be at odds with Benjamin's model of history, were it not for McCarthy's final paragraph at the conclusion of the novel. After the man dies and the boy goes off to live with new people, McCarthy ends the novel with a description of trout: "Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (287).[5] This is not the territory in *The Road*, which Rambo describes as "post-world" (101). These trout predate the world of the novel, as does the ecosystem in which they live. In short, this image does not depict a whole, regenerated, future, but a vision of the past, of a thing, as McCarthy recognizes, that could not ever be replaced once it is lost. This retrospective glimpse at the

[5] I have previously mentioned the intertextuality of McCarthy's novels. This depiction of the trout is a clear allusion to Ernest Hemingway's short stories "Big Two-Hearted River, Parts I and II" in which Nick Adams, who recently returned home from war, travels through a desolate, burnt forest to fish for trout in the river. The forest speaks to irreparable trauma, and the trout Nick catches, like those at the end of *The Road*, symbolize harmony with the world.

way the world was is a call for the reader to remember the beauty, vitality, and preciousness of the world. Once those things are gone, they are eternally irretrievable. They are not lost to history, but their loss permanently echoes through the single catastrophe that is time.

The Road, then, at its core, presents an ethical call to action. Our world, once it is lost, is irrecoverable. Rick and Jonathan Elmore look at the world as McCarthy portrays it and ask: "what exactly gets marked as redeemable or irredeemable?" (136). If it is the father's world that gets marked as redeemable by the scholarship, then Stark's claims about anthropocentrism—white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and middle-class anthropocentricity in particular—ring entirely true. However, the Elmores contend, "There is nothing of the father's world to be saved, which shows that the moral of *The Road* lies not in a recuperation or revaluation of the past but in the laying out of a new ethos, a rethought notion of community, and a need to address present suffering above all else" (132). Redemption does not serve to recover the past. The boy, at the end of the novel, cannot ever access the world as it was. Instead, he must remember the past and use his *weak* messianic power to address his present suffering in the world. He must live in the world as it is, not as it never will be again.

The concluding paragraph certainly seems incongruous with the other events of the novel. In fact, a casual reader might take the images of healthy trout in a healthy ecosystem and read that detail as McCarthy unrelentingly reminding us of what was lost so as to strip the boy and the world of all goodness and hope. Even worse, some readers might interpret the image of trout as an image of recovery, that under the boy's redemptive project, the world has achieved new life. Kenneth Brandt articulates this tension of interpretation well: "Initially, this final ensemble of images may seem a peculiar departure from the novel's

principle narrative, but the perspectival shift here to a panoramic viewpoint affirms what has been so seeringly absent from the novel: humanity's essential need to exist in concert with functioning ecosystems" (63). Humans exist in complete dependence on the world, their environment, and their ecosystem in order to live. *The Road* depicts what happens when we forget our absolute reliance on the natural world, on healthy ecosystems for our survival.

Ultimately, *The Road* triangulates *weak* messianic power, remembrance of the past, and witnessing of the future, not as empty and homogenous, but as in danger. Tim Edwards argues, "McCarthy tells a tale that needs to be told, one that warns us that the 'maps and mazes' of the world's becoming, once lost, cannot be recovered" (60). By reading *The Road* in light of McCarthy's schema of the curse and judgment, and by reworking the redemptive framework by which we read the novel, I conclude that the novel presents an ethical imperative to remember that humans unequivocally rely on healthy ecosystems to survive, witness the trauma the world will undergo if we continue in our anthropocentricity, and take action against the oppressive powers that force us to forget the vital importance of living as part of the world, not as its dominators.

In light of my larger project, *The Road* urges us to witness the fate of the world if we continue to dissect natureculture, create artificial borders, and profane nature, as *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy make evident. Indeed, *The Road* takes place in a different geographical region from McCarthy's western novels. But it is a necessary work in an analytical framework that explores the interplay between the formation of borders, history, ecocritical theory, and literary works depicting the curse and subsequent judgment. *The Road* is a reminder, a prompt to acknowledge the injustices of our past and our dependence upon the natural world. It is also a call to witness the death of the world if we do not understand

that the actions and events of the past echo throughout time forever. As Benjamin says, time is a single catastrophe, a pile of wreckage in which nothing is lost to history. It is not a discrete, progressive time in which the individual sequences bear no relation to each other. The environmental violence of *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy will always exist in the wreckage of time. If we do not recognize that role of history, as it appears in McCarthy's border fiction, the fate of our world will look terrifyingly like that of *The Road.*

We are left with an ethical imperative, a call to action. We cannot allow the world to undergo unbridled consumption. There is too much at stake. Too much will be lost forever if we do not change. Here, a bioregional understanding of the world proves invaluable to preventing the cataclysmic end of the world. In that regard, three key terms standout: "*dwelling, sustainability*, and *reinhabitation*" (Lynch et al. 4). That is, to continue living in our world, and not the world of *The Road*, we must reconsider our place, our dwelling in the world. We must rethink how we live as part of the world, not separate from it. The current global capitalist consumption is unsustainable and can only lead to ecological catastrophe. Finally, we must reinhabit, change the way that we currently live in the world to take our undeniable dependence on healthy ecosystems into account. We can no longer deny the findings of climate science, and we can no longer live as though our actions have no effect on the places in which we live. History, science, and McCarthy's fiction tell us otherwise. Once the world is lost, it cannot be put right again.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. 1987. Aunt Lute, 2012.

Arnold, Edwin T. "The Last of the Trilogy: First Thoughts on *Cities of the Plain*." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, UP of Mississippi, 1999, pp. 221-47.

Barnhill, David Landis. "Critical Utopianism and Bioregional Ecocriticism." *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, edited by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armburster, U of Georgia P, 2012, pp. 212-25.

Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott et al., Harvard UP, 2003 pp. 389-400.

Blair, John. "Mexico and the Borderlands in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*." *Critique*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2001, pp. 301-07. *EBSCOHost*, doi: 10.1080/00111610109601146.

Bloom, Harold. Introduction. *Blood Meridian*, by Cormac McCarthy, 1985, Modern Library ed., Random House, 2010, pp. vii-xv.

Boehme, Jacob. *The Aurora*. 1612. Kessinger Publishing, 2010.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Blackwell, 2005.

Daugherty, Leo. "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, UP of Mississippi, 1999, pp. 159-74.

Dominy, Jordan J. "Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 143-58. *JSTOR*, doi:10.5325/cormmccaj.13.1.0143.

Edwards, Tim. "The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 6, Special Issue, 2008, pp. 55-61. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909382.

Ellis, Jay. "'What Happens to Country' in *Blood Meridian*." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2006, pp. 85-97. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/4143880.

Elmore, Rick and Jonathan Elmore. "'You Can Stay Here with Your Papa and Die or You Can Go with Me': The Ethical Imperative of *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2018, pp. 133-48. doi: 10.4325/cormmccaj.16.2.0133.

Frye, Steven. "Cormac McCarthy's 'World in Its Making': Romantic Naturalism in *The Crossing*." *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, pp. 46-65. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23431203.

---. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. U of South Carolina P, 2009.

Greve, Julius. "'Another Kind of Clay': On *Blood Meridian's* Okenian Philosophy of Nature."*Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 27-53. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.5325/cormmccaj.13.1.0027.

Gugin, David. "The Blood of a Nomad: Environmental Stylistics and *All the Pretty Horses*." *Cormac McCarthy's Borders and Landscapes*, edited by Louise Jillett, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 83-94.

Guillemin, Georg. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. Texas A&M UP, 2004.

Haraway, Donna. "The Companion Species Manifesto." 2003. *Manifestly Haraway*, edited by Donna Haraway and Cary J. Wolfe, U of Minnesota P, 2016, pp. 91-198.

---. "The Cyborg Manifesto." 1985. *Manifestly Haraway*, edited by Donna Haraway and Cary J. Wolfe, U of Minnesota P, 2016, pp. 3-90.

Hickman, Trenton. "Against Nostalgia: Turning the Page of Cormac McCarthy's *Cities of the Plain*." *Western American Literature*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2007, pp. 142-63. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43022548.

Huebert, David. "Eating and Mourning the Corpse of the World: Ecological Cannibalism and Elegiac Protomourning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 66-87. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.5325/cormmccaj.15.1.0066.

"Implement." *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/92451?rskey=pdK9N3&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid.

Klee, Paul. *Angelus Novus*. 1920, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Link, Eric Carl. "McCarthy and Literary Naturalism." *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Steven Frye, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 149-61.

Luce, Dianne C. "The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, UP of Mississippi, 1999, pp. 195-220.

Lynch, Tom et al. "Introduction." *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, edited by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armburster, U of Georgia P, 2012, pp. 1-29.

Martínez, Ignacio. "Settler Colonialism in New Spain and the Early Mexican Republic." *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, edited by Edward Cavanaugh and Lorenzo Veracini, Routledge, 2016, pp. 109-24.

Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden*. Oxford UP, 1964.

McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. Vintage, 1992.

---. *Blood Meridian*. 1985. Vintage, 1992.

---. *Cities of the Plain*. Vintage, 1998.

---. *The Crossing*. Vintage, 1994.

---. "The Kekulé Problem." 2017, *Nautilus*, http://nautil.us/issue/47/consciousness/the-kekul-problem.

---. *The Road*. Vintage, 2006.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. *John Milton: The Complete Poems and Major Prose*, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes, Hackett, 2003.

Monk, Nicholas. "*All the Pretty Horses*, the Border, and Ethnic Encounter." *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Steven Frye, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 121-32.

Montague, Kate. "Baroque Meridians: Between Myth and Actuality on the American Frontier." *Cormac McCarthy's Borders and Landscapes*, edited by Louise Jillett, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 95-106.

Mundik, Petra. "Terra Damnata: The Anticosmic Mysticism of *Blood Meridian*." *Cormac McCarthy's Borders and Landscapes*, edited by Louise Jillett, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 29-46.

Owens, Barcley. *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. The U of Arizona P, 2000.

Parrish, Timothy. "History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy's Western Novels." *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Steven Frye, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 67-78.

Rambo, Shelly L. "Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* after the End of the World." *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2008, pp. 90-120. *ProQuest.*

Shaviro, Steven. "'The Very Life of Darkness': A Reading of Blood Meridian." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, UP of Mississippi, 1999, pp. 145-58.

Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Wesleyan UP, 1973.

Stark, Hannah. "'All These Things He Saw and Did Not See': Witnessing the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Critical Survey*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, pp. 71-84. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42751035.

"Suzerain." *Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/195271?redirectedFrom=suzerain#eid.

United States Government. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848. *National Archives*, https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/guadalupe-hidalgo-original.

The Bible. King James Version, biblegateway.com, accessed 31 March 2019.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. 1921. Dover, 2010.

Veracini, Lorenzo. "Introduction: Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination." *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, edited by Edward Cavanaugh and Lorenzo Veracini, Routledge, 2016, pp. 1-8.

Vita

Karle Russell Stinehour was born in Asheville, North Carolina, to Russell and LeeAnn Stinehour. He graduated from Asheville Christian Academy in North Carolina in May 2013. The following autumn, he entered Appalachian State University to study English with a concentration in Literary Studies, and in May 2017 he was awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree. In the fall of 2017, he accepted a graduate assistantship at the University Writing Center at Appalachian State University and began study toward a Master of Arts degree in English. In the fall of 2018, he began a graduate teaching assistantship as an instructor of Rhetoric and Composition. The M.A. was awarded in May 2019.

He currently resides in Boone, North Carolina, with his wife Natalie.